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The Long Finger

Albert Boissière

Fiction (French).

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THE MISSING FINGER

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THE MISSING FINGER

A Story of Mystery

BY

ALBERT BOISSIÈRE

1 2

TRANSLATED BY

MARY J. SAFFORD

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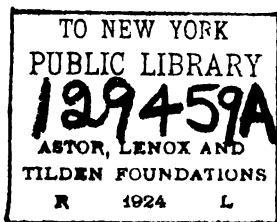
NEW YORK

DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY

1911

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"UN CRIME A ÉTÉ COMMIS"

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Published September, 1911

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I

IN WHICH, PERHAPS, EVERYTHING WHICH IS TO
FOLLOW DEPENDS UPON A LETTER FROM
THE ARTIST ALBERT LEBOURG

I WAS born at la Varenne-Saint-Hilaire, on the 17th of June of I don't know what year. It was on a 17th of a month I no longer remember that the civil court pronounced the divorce between Maxime Aubry, artist, and Pauline Mutel, his wife. It was again upon a 17th, the 17th of October, 1907, that I was found murdered by an unknown hand, in the city of Dieppe, at the end of the Quay Henri IV. And once more, by a providential chance, it was on the 17th of last month that I again gave my name to Pauline Mutel, my divorced wife!

Superstitious minds are at liberty to assign to this fateful number 17 an importance in the occurrences which I do not recognise! I shall

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have enough to do in explaining the extraordinary incidents with which I have been mixed up, without adding to them any useless mystery.

In fact, my divorce and my second marriage are connected with the terrible story only as incidental circumstances which, to a certain degree, are independent of it.

Nevertheless, it is plausible to suppose that, but for it, the mysterious affair of the van Brymans brothers would never have happened, or, if so, it would not have been in the same way. Nor is it rash to add that, but for the van Brymans affair, I should probably never have been led to marry a second time my first wife, Pauline Mutel.

Moreover, it is easy to make a calculation whose solution we possess. People do it generally and stupidly for the most trivial actions in life. We say: "I lost an opportunity to-day which I shall not recover, the chance of going to such a place, of transacting that business; and this merely because the doctor ordered me to stay in my room. I was forced to keep my room, because I caught cold three days be-

fore while loitering at the corner of the Rue La Boétie, for instance, watching some trifling accident—an auto which had run into the front of a pastry-cook's shop—when it was bitterly cold, with a wind blowing keen enough to cut one in two! Now, if the auto had not dashed so noisily into the front of the shop, I should not have delayed at the corner of the Rue La Boétie,—etc., etc.

So we reach the conclusion, unreasonably, that, if autos had not been invented, we should not have to stay in our rooms, by order of the Faculty. And again . . . the series of consequences!

Evidently, all this is very specious. It is less so to refer the whole to chance and bow before bronchitis. And, above all, it is more logical to look after the disease when in its grasp than to discuss endlessly the conditions under which you caught it!

In the same way I might say that the terrible adventure which befell me began with the friendly letter from the landscape artist, Albert Lebourg, which would be very nearly veracious

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—for I am not absolutely sure that it might not have occurred in any case.

However, let us take the matter from the commencement or, more precisely, from the distance, and satisfy ourselves with explaining the facts. Facts, I have every reason to believe, will speak better than I could do.

Oh, zounds! If I were a writer, I would plunge at once into the terrible portion! But I am only an artist—and so far as the horror of the story is concerned, whether I desire it or not, the reader will lose nothing by waiting!

I had been settled a month at Tréport, engaged in painting the lighter sides of seashore life, which is usually nothing but telling a story, and was not much delighted with my work. True, I had found nothing very special, but had accumulated a quantity of amusing notes, when I received a letter from Lebourg, saying in substance :

If you go as far as Dieppe, don't fail to visit the suburb of Pollet. To be sure, since the decline of the port and the abandonment

of the Newfoundland fisheries, it has no longer the colour nor the picturesqueness it possessed when I lived there; but you will certainly still find original bits that will please you.

Nothing more was necessary to induce me to change my quarters to another point of the Norman coast; and I can still remember the lamentations of my worthy landlady, Mother Vincent, who lived back of the Musoir, when she saw me packing my trunks.

It was the latter part of September, and I intended to spend a portion of the winter in this locality; I wanted to find here some tragical scene for my painting for the National. . . . That is why I formed the plan of going on foot along the road from Tréport to Dieppe, my box of colours on my back, my cane in my hand, my pipe in my mouth, pondering over my idea and halting at the various stopping-places.

My landlady said to me:

“If you want me to tell you of a house where you will be comfortable, Monsieur Aubry, go to the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf. She is a cousin

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of my departed husband—he died on board the *Sainte-Marie-aux-Anges*. He was a whaler! Her name is Hurteaux—and you do not know Dieppe, from what I see! ”

“ I’ll go to the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf, and your cousin Hurteaux! ” I assented.

So the good woman had my trunks carried to the station, and wrote a letter four pages long, undoubtedly eulogistic, to her cousin, to inform her of my coming.

We shall see, later, that Madame Hurteaux was obliged to wait a long time for the arrival of a person thus recommended who, in the end, gave her more trouble than profit.

I had planned my itinerary and divided the Eu road into four stopping-places, because it runs along the coast at a sufficiently good distance from the cliffs, and I counted the time I should lose in visiting the little homes of the fishermen. Those I saw, starting from Criel, did not interest me long, certainly, for that very evening, somewhat against my will, I found myself at the end of the second stage of my journey, which was a little market-town on the main

road, with two rows of houses, called Biville-sur-Mer—doubtless because the sea was two kilometers away.

I saw a wrought-iron sign, on which some untrained hand had daubed a magpie holding in its beak a five-franc piece—a defaced sketch, explained by the rude legend:

AT THE THIEVING MAGPIE
ENTERTAINMENT FOR MAN AND
BEAST
HOTEL KEPT BY THE VAN BRYMANS
BROTHERS

All this seemed to me quite an amusing combination.

Before the door stood the wagon of a carter, who was feeding his horses with oats in big wooden troughs, while a dozen hens were picking up the scattered grain among the hoofs of the unbridled animals. A pleasant-looking woman, standing on the threshold, was wiping her mouth with the corner of her blue apron.

And, just as the seven o'clock Angelus

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sounded from the village church, I entered *The Thieving Magpie*, to my misfortune—or, to speak more accurately, to the misfortune of the people who lived there, gathered beneath this roof in community, in one family, and apparently in harmony.

II

HOW IT WAS EXCUSABLE TO MISTAKE OTTO FOR FRANZ AND FRANZ FOR OTTO

I SAW immediately by the woman's embarrassed manner that, speaking seriously, the sign was meant only for the front of the house. The invitation, discreetly worded, *Entertainment for man and beast*, could not regularly draw many customers to the van Brymans brothers for, at my request, she exclaimed:

“Dinner? Night's lodging? I'll ask Otto!”

And she went into the living-room, which in winter was lighted by a single kerosene lamp hung from the beams, but now wrapped with yellow gauze to protect it from the flies.

In this room the country blacksmith, his day's work done, was playing a game of dominoes with a man who must be Otto. The former held two dominoes put together in the hand clenched upon his leather apron—and his partner seemed absorbed in a difficult combination.

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The woman passed her arm coaxingly around the man's shoulders and whispered:

"Otto! This gentleman wants a bedroom and dinner!"

Otto, without letting himself be interrupted in his calculation, answered:

"Presently!"

And he said to the blacksmith:

"Fours! It's all or nothing, Père François!"

"It's nothing for you, Brymans!" jeered Père François, spreading on the white marble the two dominoes he had held in his calloused hand.

And Otto owned that he was beaten. Turning suddenly, he seemed to scan me from head to foot and, doubtless satisfied with his inspection, scratched his forehead before answering:

"Well, yes!—I don't say—but, this isn't considered exactly a hotel! There's the end room!—And, as for the food, the gentleman certainly won't find the cooking to his taste."

Then the unskilful merchant, as if he wanted to discourage or get rid of me, added:

"You'll find everything you want at Dieppe,

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four leagues from here.—And Franz is just starting for the fish.”

I came to the innkeeper's assistance. His embarrassment, following his wife's confusion, amused me. I told him, in a few words, my intention of visiting the coast the next morning, my few requirements, and the pleasure I should take in “eating just as they did.”

The woman had not removed her arm from her husband's shoulders. Resting her pleasant face, so round and rosy, upon her bare arm, she whispered into his ear words I could not hear. He nodded and rose.—She turned toward me, saying:

“If you would like to look, I'll show you your room!”

The blacksmith interposed cordially:

“Perhaps the gentleman would take a little something with us . . . since it's Otto's turn.”

The jollity of the invitation pleased me. I was thirsty—and accepted.

Otto had gone out. Through the window opening upon the apple orchard came the squawking of poultry whose necks were being

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cut, and I understood that they were going to be roasted in my honour in the Norman fashion.

As I turned on my stool to protest, though flattered by the compliment, Otto was unhooking his jacket from the peg. I said to him, as if he had really been an old boon companion of mine as well as the blacksmith's:

"Come, Monsieur Otto, don't go to any expense."

The man answered:

"I'm not Otto. I am Franz!"

The blacksmith burst into a roar of laughter and beat his hands upon his leather apron. The woman, too, behind the row of bottles on the bar, laughed heartily. The blacksmith said to her:

"Explain the matter to the gentleman at once."

The man had put on his jacket and gone out.

He had scarcely left the room when Otto returned and joined in the laughter of the others.

"You made a mistake, like everybody else! But I assure you that Franz did not do it to

make sport! He is going to the shore for the fish."

And he called:

"Franz! Will you have a drink?"

And Franz returned. Side by side, I saw Franz and Otto van Brymans, twin brothers, whose resemblance to each other was so perfect, so absolute, that it seemed to me from the first, without knowing why, actually torturing.

But the brief and incomprehensible impression of pain made upon me by this meeting with the van Brymans was not felt at all by the blacksmith, for he began to laugh again and addressed a coarse jest to Otto's wife.

"How have you managed never to make a mistake?"

The joke must have been a familiar one. It made both the twins laugh in precisely the same way, a mechanical laugh, as if worn out by too frequent use. The woman, shrugging her shoulders, retorted in the same tone:

"You know that I have a mark, Père François!"

"Oh, yes . . . on his little finger!" laughed

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the blacksmith, winking his eye, with the ambiguous meaning which peasants put into their answers when they want to add a little spice.

Otto instantly laid his hand flat upon the table. His brother Franz placed his beside it. The two were bewildering in their resemblance, with the same short fingers and bitten nails. The two thumbs showed a similar defect, the nail split lengthwise, with the same white spot on each. . . . Nature had taken pleasure in repeating, with perplexing diligence, the slightest peculiarities of these two individuals!

Otto showed me a silver ring on his little finger, which he had worn from early childhood. It seemed sunk in the swollen flesh that formed a cushion and could not have been removed without breaking it.

"There is scarcely anything except that to distinguish us," he said. "When we were little fellows my mother put a red band on one and a blue one on the other to mark us. Now, if the poor old lady were still alive, she would lose her Fleming—as the saying goes!"

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"That is true!" Franz assented, in the same slow, monotonous voice, a voice whose tone was so precisely similar that it seemed like an echo of the other or its faithful continuation. . . .

"That is true! And people who have known us for years are deceived every day!"

"So am I!" added Otto's wife. "It happens more often than there are fast days in the week!"

"Then," I remarked, "like all twins, you help the resemblance still more by dressing in the same way!"

"That is a custom we have always followed," said Otto. "We renew our clothes twice a year. One tries on the garments for the other."

"Your shoes? Your linen? Your hats?"

"Everything! Everything!" said Franz. "There are doctors who have seen us as naked as we were born—and aside from the ring . . ."

The blacksmith began to jest again, the woman to shrug her shoulders, and the everlasting stories about twins, the tale of the bar-

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ber who had shaved Otto five minutes before when Franz entered his shop with a beard a week old—others, all sorts, began to appear in procession. I hoped to cut them short by relating the anecdote in the history of the “Chevaux de Lorraine.”—My pedantry bore no fruit.

“We don’t know,” Otto responded very pleasantly. “What we do know is that these things happened to us as they have happened to all twins, probably . . . and worse ones may occur!”

“I don’t mind such things at all!” said Franz. “But I must be at Dieppe before eight o’clock to attend to my work. Good-night, sir.”

He held out his hand to me.

“The fowl is roasted,” said Otto’s wife; “we can go to the table.”

The blacksmith rose in his turn, as if somewhat reluctant. And I went into the kitchen of the inn, where a pretty, fair-haired boy about ten years old, as tall as the table, was awkwardly setting the dishes upon the white cloth.

"Where are you going to put the gentleman, Fritz?" asked the mother.

"Close to me," replied the child of the van Brymans couple.

I kissed the little lad for his expression of sympathetic feeling.

"Good!" said Otto, when I had taken my seat. "You are going to be well framed."

Then he added:

"Go out, Dick!"

But, at my left, a big spaniel was pressing his warm muzzle against my thigh. I was as much flattered by the friendliness of the dog as by the child's, and I patted Dick, which was an excellent way of not getting rid of him again.

III

IN WHICH FRANZ REPEATS, WORD FOR WORD, WHAT
OTTO HAD TOLD ME THE EVENING BEFORE

It was Franz who took me, the following day, to the little creek of Biville.

After my tiresome tramp of the afternoon and my pleasant supper with Otto and his wife, I had had a good night's rest at the inn of *The Thieving Magpie*. Without exactly knowing why, I felt that I was in a sympathetic atmosphere.

The morning was cool and sunshiny; everything made one feel that life was worth living. The spaniel at the inn had followed me; I counted one friend more in my existence. Franz walked at my side, leading by the bridle his horse, harnessed into the cart heaped with empty baskets, in which he was going to put mussels.

He explained the mechanism of his business, which consisted in taking the catch of the fish-

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women of the three or four neighbouring villages and carrying it to Dieppe. He realised an excellent profit from this, but did not boast of it, with the prudence of the peasant, who is always complaining of Providence and the rest. . . .

He was called the fish-dealer, though he attended exclusively to the shipment of mussels, shrimps, and also crabs, at the season of the equinoxes.

Now his brother had told me all this the night before while we were dining. It was not Franz's little talk that interested me, since I had already heard the story from the lips of Otto, but it was his voice, so like Otto's, his voice with the same sing-song, flexible intonations, his way of expressing himself, so exactly similar to his brother's that I recognised the local terms and the identical words. This greatly amused me!

Franz, when once started to talk, was difficult to stop. He told me how they had happened to settle in the country, he and his brother, entirely as if it were a matter of chance. They were originally from Antwerp, and their first profession was that of sailors. When very

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young, they fished along the coast. Otto had married Pauline Steurs, who lived at Borgerhout, on the Turnhout road, and he, Franz, had remained a bachelor. The Steurs girl did not possess much money to set up housekeeping, but people have plenty of courage when they are young! They would probably always have lived in their native country, if a little inheritance had not come to change their lives. It was an uncle of Pauline Steurs, one Leopold Steurs, whom they had not seen for years in Brabant, his native region. He had gone to France as a farm labourer, had prospered there, then settled at Biville, etc., etc.

I no longer even heard Franz.

It seemed as if I was listening to the repetition, word for word,—yes, word for word, I am not exaggerating,—of the story of the night before, related by Otto: the journey of the couple to Normandy to receive the legacy of Uncle Steurs, ex-innkeeper of *The Thieving Magpie*, then how Franz had joined Otto and his wife, as if they really could not live apart!

There was certainly nothing extraordinary in

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the settlement of these two Belgians on the Norman coast, and I attached no importance to it. My interest was still aroused only by the marvellous resemblance between the twins, and my mind was taking delight in a thousand notes of a thousand details—the voice, sentences, words—which seemed as if they really could come only from the same lips, be the expression only of the same soul!

We reached the bay. The descent was by a sort of corkscrew staircase, cut in the cliff itself.

The horizon of the Norman coast stretched perpendicularly, waste and desolate, at the left to the fort of Ailly, beyond the roadstead of Dieppe, which Franz pointed out. The sea was calm and magnificent in its placidity. . . . The fishing-boats in the offing, hauled into the wind, were passing each other on their way to their ports. Gulls were fluttering, white spots quivering against the emerald of the rolling waves. In the dull roar of the ebbing tide voices from below pierced with special resonance. They were those of the mussel-pickers, whose

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outlines moved as they went from rock to rock. From the top of the perpendicular cliff the figures seemed reduced to miniature size, yet standing forth on the fine sand as if on the edge of a mirror with a distinctness very curious to observe.

The artist in me rejoiced to see a bare-legged little girl run along the beach at the edge of the shore, casting a shadow upon the luminosity of the water.

Franz had fastened his horse to a stake driven into the earth.

"It's a mare—a vicious beast," he said. "I bought her for thirty pistoles, and she is certainly worth more!"

He pointed with outstretched hand to the fallow fields which stretched to the edge of the cliff.

"All this is Otto's!"

At the edge of the plain, I distinguished a labourer turning his plough at the end of a furrow. Franz added:

"That is Otto!"

It was still precisely the tone of Otto van Brymans' slow, monochord voice, when the even-

ing before he had showed me the stables, the baskets for fish, the fish-dealer's cart, while saying in exactly the same way:

"All this is Franz's."

It was again his voice when he had returned to the room where I was sitting opposite to the blacksmith, and had told me on my arrival:

"That is Franz!"

Then, in my mind, I mingled, quite at my ease, the various objects, the animals, the people, the work horses, and the mare for the cart, and made the two brothers only one person, or at least tried to do so, by laughing and repeating:

"Yes, yes, all this is Otto's and Franz's—and they are the van Brymans brothers!"

But the spaniel, Dick, must have been far more clever than I; for, having scented his master in the middle of the field, he left us to run toward the labourer.

We had gone down to the tragic strand Cadoudal illustrated, and I could admire a wild and picturesque scene, well suited to attract my brush.

. . . Women in rags carried their full baskets on their backs, bending their spines and stum-

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bling on the shingle. Children, supplied with pails in which crabs were swarming, ran in every direction at once. The men, soaked with water, their nets on their shoulders, came along in their turn.

The people of the beach are somewhat the pariahs among seafaring folk; they live along the margin like waifs. I could not help thinking of the drawings of Raffaëli, the evocation of his rag-pickers of Saint-Ouen, of the whole human herd of which I had a heart-rending replica before my eyes. I set about the duty of trying a few sketches, strongly interested in a local colour so striking and so new to me—and until noon, I may say that I forgot Otto who so strangely resembled Franz, and Franz who looked so exactly like Otto!

IV

THE DISCLOSURES OF PAULINE STEURS

TO-DAY, with the recoil after the terrible tragedy with which I was associated, if I should again question myself and ask for what secret reasons independent of my will I remained in that inn, instead of passing through the stopping-place to settle in Dieppe, I should find few imperative causes, and I would hesitate among the plausible motives that I might have been able to give to myself!

Obviously there might be a very romantic one, which the sequence of events would justify. This would be to confess that my fate was appointed there; that I was obeying my destiny and could not, in any manner whatever, escape it. But all that is literature and, I repeat, I am only an artist—that is, a painter whose trade is not to be satisfied with words, and to represent visible things! This is why

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I still prefer to believe what I believed the day after my arrival at Biville-sur-Mer, to know that my curiosity as an artist was the only reason that detained me, to the misfortune of every one, in *The Thieving Magpie*. When I told the van Brymans couple that I should prolong my stay with them because the people of the coast interested me so much, the wife could not control her joy and I saw her flush crimson with pleasure. I could scarcely attribute her satisfaction to the account of mere lucre. But the equal gratification of her husband, accompanied by an earnest shake of the hand and the assurance that everything would be done for my comfort, confirmed me in the idea that the interest I felt for these worthy people was cordially returned.

Little Fritz, too, who was continually at my heels, made himself an echo of the pleasure which my decision afforded his parents, and I am not certain that Dick, if he had understood, would not also have manifested some joy.

Franz van Brymans, the fish-dealer, alone remained indifferent.

I ought to mention it now. It seemed to me that I had found a way of no longer confounding those bewildering twins—like everybody else, like the blacksmith, like those who had known them for years, like Pauline Steurs herself if one was to put confidence in her statements! My touchstone was fragile, my reasoning specious. Perhaps this is again literature. But here is my criterion, such as it is.

When I found myself with Otto, his conversation was extremely pleasant to me. When the same conversation, on the same subject, with the identical remarks, took place between myself and Franz, the whole charm was broken, and I no longer found anything agreeable in it!

This was assuredly a matter of feeling, and I am the first to recognise that to trust to so superficial an impression is reasoning haphazard.

Nevertheless . . .

The next day but one I begged Franz to do me a favour when he went to Dieppe. I requested him to go to the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf, to which Mère Vincent had despatched my baggage from Tréport, and bring me the two valises

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that contained my underclothing. I told him to ask the landlady to keep a room for me until the day when I should determine to leave Biville, which I was not then able to fix.

He brought my valises the same evening and said to me:

"The Hurteaux woman, who is the cousin of Mère Vincent of Tréport, was already worried about you. I relieved her mind!"

Pauline van Brymans was listening uneasily.

Franz went out to join his brother Otto, who was going to put some beets in silos in the fields before night closed in.

My first impulse was to follow him; but I was tired; it was late; the evening promised to be cold; the landlady had just flung a faggot upon the hearth, and I thought it would be much better to warm myself quietly before the fire-place while smoking a good pipe, with Dick, the spaniel, at my right hand, and Fritz, the child, at my left.

The woman was attending to household duties. She moved to and fro, changing the places of utensils without apparent motive, as

if actually embarrassed. Suddenly she said to me:

"One might suppose, tell me, sir, that Franz did not like to see you here!"

I turned toward Otto's wife. Her face, illumined by the flames on the hearth, was thoughtful, with a line of anxiety that divided her forehead from the roots of her hair to the bone of the nose. I had no time to answer. She had sat down near me and was making a screen of both hands in front of her face, on account of the intense heat. She went on:

"Ah! he is very queer! . . . If you knew!"

"Yes!" I said. "It is no use for them to resemble each other till they mingle like two drops of water. All the same, they are different in disposition."

"No, that is not so," she replied quickly. "On the contrary, I can say that they have precisely the same reserved temperament . . . and if there were a difference, I should be the only person in the world to detect it—Ah! Yes! I will answer for that!"

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I tapped the bowl of my pipe against my thumb-nail, and replied:

"Come now! You say that because you are Otto's wife! If you were the wife of Franz, perhaps you would say precisely the opposite."

"Do you think so?" she said slyly. "I know what I can depend upon, I suppose! Otto is good—and Franz is not good! That's all! Otto is good because he is happy, with me and his little Fritz, and Franz—he, is not happy! Do you understand?"

And, while saying this, she had drawn her little Fritz to her and embraced him distractedly, as if she would fain have saved him from some future misfortune!

"Besides," she went on without a pause—and she appeared to be glad to pour out her thoughts—"to you, sir, I can tell everything! I can say fully what I have never uttered to any human being! We have entire confidence in you. Franz is jealous."

"Jealous?"

"Jealous of everything in life! He is jealous

of everything and everybody. And it is entirely his own fault, too!"

"Ah!—Why his fault?"

"Because he has behaved dishonourably toward Pauline."

"Is not your name Pauline?"

She smiled.

"Yes! My name is Pauline, too—Pauline Steurs! I was born in Borgerhout on the Turnhout road! But I don't want to talk about myself! and yet, on the whole, perhaps it is because of having acted unskilfully with me that he feels so much rancour against the whole world!

"I am going to tell you everything, commencing at the beginning! I was living at home with my parents, who were weavers, when I met the van Brymans, good fellows who were very highly respected on the quays, where they were famous on account of their resemblance and the pranks they already played! They came to the ball of the Place de Meir, and were met at the fairs with other young men and girls. My parents, from choice, would not have wanted me to marry a sailor, but one doesn't always have a

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chance to choose when one has no dowry. I had danced several times with Franz and with Otto, but it was Franz who was most attentive! . . . I was really laughed at a little among the groups, and it was frequently said: 'The Steurs girl won't know where she is—she wouldn't be able to tell the man she loves, they are so much alike!' And there was some truth in it! But one evening when Franz accompanied me to the Turnhout road and repeated, in a sneering way, the remarks of the people, I answered: 'You need only come to my parents' house to offer yourself next Sunday after vespers, and you shall see whether I can recognise the man who loves me!' He burst into a roar of laughter, and answered: 'For my part I want to be free, and shall never marry, unless it is a woman with money!' The laugh and these spiteful words caused me so much vexation that, from that day, I no longer danced at the fairs except with Otto van Brymans—which made people laugh at me still more."

"Ah ha!" I interrupted—"and it was Otto who came to see your parents one Sunday after

vespers, at Borgerhout! It was Otto whom you married, and you were both rewarded, since your uncle Steurs left you his property, and Heaven filled up the measure of your happiness by giving you a little son, as pretty as a Cupid! But—how can all this make Franz unhappy? I don't exactly see . . .”

“You don't see because you are not in a position to do it! You can't imagine how jealous Franz is of Otto,—without Otto's noticing it! Otto's comfortable life, uncle Leopold's property, my darling little Fritz . . . Franz might have had all this! He envies it all! He has let everything escape by his own fault! This means that his life is a failure—and he is suffering from it.”

“He loves you, perhaps!”

“Oh no! not that! I should have perceived it, you know, during the ten years we have lived side by side.”

“And in those ten years, has he never made an allusion to the marriage which might have taken place, if he had gone to ask for your hand before Otto?”

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Pauline van Brymans' face resumed its stern, thoughtful expression. The same line marked her forehead between the eyes, whose hazel colour deepened suddenly. I saw her bosom heave beneath the gown. She uttered a sigh, lowered her lids over eyes that had again become troubled, and replied:

"Yes—Once he asked me: 'In case Otto should die, Pauline, would you take me for a husband?' I was so unprepared for so unexpected a question that I answered furiously, 'You? Oh! That! Never!' And I wanted to spit in his face for asking so revolting a question. That was three years ago!"

She removed her fingers, and the fire illumined her calm, honest face.

"And since?"

"Since?—He has never opened his lips for such a supposition!—Since?—He is always there, around me, near his brother Otto, near our little Fritz. He is always there, *among us all!* And there is not a single human being in the whole world, except myself, to divine that he is not happy!"

V

PAULINE, PAULINE, AND PAULINE

PAULINE STEURS' loquacity had only emphasised my sympathy for Otto and my distrust of Franz.

One afternoon, when Otto was going to the fields to give the last turn to the dressing, I went with him. He had carried his gun and gave me a shot at a fall of young partridges. Otto was little more talkative than Franz. It was the same close-shaven, reserved face, the same compression of the lips which allowed words to slip through rarely, as if with regret.

On this day, however, he was in one of his good moods, and more garrulous than usual. I don't know how we happened to speak of his brother.

"Oh, he!" he said to me, "he is perfectly happy! He makes what he wants in his business. He has none of the worries of farming,

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the fear of hail, the fear of drought, he hasn't the care of a family with anxiety about a child to be established later! Ah yes! Franz is happy! . . . that can be said!"

I compared these words, uttered with certainty, and the anxious remarks made by Otto's wife the evening before, and discovered what a gulf separated the opinions of the married couple.

Otto, in a confidential vein, continued:

"He might have married . . . as we did! We fully expected it, last year! He was continually going to see a woman in the city who keeps a little shop back from the coast, where she sells ivories and shells—what are called 'souvenirs of Dieppe'! Then he suddenly changed his mind! He still visits her—but he says he is very well off as he is, and sticks to it. On account of people's gossip we would rather have had them get married! It would have been more proper! But, after all, it's their business and not ours! Isn't that so?"

I remembered, opportunely, the words of Otto's wife: "He treated Pauline dishonour-

ably!" and to draw forth an additional confidence, I added:

"I know. He has not been absolutely fair with Pauline!"

Otto van Brymans instantly resumed his usual reserved manner, and I fully believed I had been guilty of some bit of awkwardness, that is, that I was going to know nothing more. Nevertheless, after a short silence, he replied:

"Ah! so you knew? It was my wife who told you? Fie! Fair? We can't say! We don't know her! All that we know comes from him! And you are aware that he thinks about things more than he talks—that he is as miserly with his words as with his pennies! But she isn't a woman of no reputation—since he promised her marriage! She is a very good sort of woman, who has met with misfortunes! Between ourselves, she does not belong to the same class in society as Franz, who, like me, is a man without education! And her name is Pauline—like my wife's!"

This coincidence made him laugh. He called to Dick, who was chasing the hens at the en-

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trance of the village, and took up a question which must have disturbed him in his summary disclosures.

"And you, sir, are you married, like myself, or a bachelor, like Franz? I am not asking you this from curiosity. It's for the sake of saying something—from politeness!"

"I am neither a married man, like you, my good Otto, nor a bachelor, like Franz."

"I don't understand!"

"I have been married, like yourself, and now I am free, like your brother—I am divorced! And my wife's name was Pauline, like yours—and like Franz's sweetheart's."

"Yes, that is extraordinary!" remarked Otto seriously.

"Why extraordinary? In a city of twenty-five thousand inhabitants, like Dieppe, there are certainly half a score of women who are named Pauline. You have only to gather their husbands; they will not be astonished to have each a wife who bears the same Christian name!"

"That is true," said Otto. "That is true! It's an accident!"

It was certainly an accident.

There could be no bond between Pauline Mutel, my divorced wife, and Pauline Steurs of Borgerhout—any more than there surely was none between the woman who sold “souvenirs of Dieppe” and Pauline Mutel.

But this conversation revived in me something akin to a retrospective vision and, all the afternoon, I was beset by the remembrance of my wife, to whom, for a long time, I had given few thoughts.

I recalled, with a certain exactitude, the last recollection I had of her. It went back more than two years! I was not then the well-known artist I am now. It was some time after the decree was pronounced, a very impartial and very foolish decree, based upon the mutual wrongs of the husband and wife.

As to wrongs, neither of us had many to complain of, unless it was that I passionately loved my profession, she did not understand it in the least!—At the end of a year, there was an irritating lack of harmony every instant, an increasing constraint which made us both per-

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ceive that we had married blindly without, perhaps, taking into account that possibly we were not suited to each other.

She had a small dowry which her parents had given her to launch her into life, as if into a misty dream, with the false idea that life is only a dream! And she took advantage of the dowry to expect me, undoubtedly, to become famous the very day after our marriage and to believe that I should bring to her all the honours of renown! She was not constituted to struggle, and I soon felt that she would be a useless companion in the one upon which I had entered! From this condition were born all sorts of incompatibilities which, swiftly and logically, had ended in our disunion.

Aside from this, I had nothing with which to reproach her—and I now saw her again across the past years, not ill-natured, pretty enough, rather neutral! I saw her again as I had seen her the last time, more than two years ago—after the divorce—in a millinery shop which she had opened, on the Rue Batignolles, to support herself by her work; for her family,

strenuous supporters of morality, would not hear her name mentioned!

And all the rest of the day, I did nothing but think of Pauline Mutel!

I was imbued with unaffected melancholy. A remnant of old affection vaguely stirred in the depths of my soul and created a dulness without my being able to understand the cause. I now grew interested and asked myself: "What has she become?" I compared with the course of our grey life of former days, the routine of my present one. Fame had come to me; my success had not given me, perhaps, the pride that we always expect from it, but something more profoundly human: peaceful satisfaction with my task led to a worthy end.

Perhaps—who knows—if fame and fortune had come sooner, perhaps she might have been a sweet and charming companion in triumph! And everything which had happened would not have occurred! And I felt alone, very much alone, for the first time in long months!

While waiting for the dinner hour, I had taken my pencils and was amusing myself in the

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sitting-room, deserted at this time, by making sketches, my mind elsewhere, my attention absent.

It was a corner of the tavern: the old clock, with its copper pendulum . . . then, with a sharp, bold stroke, the silhouette of little Fritz, who had come to steal some sugar from the bar. After that, my hand wandered haphazard, my hand was the accomplice of my roving imagination—and I was surprised to have cleverly reconstituted a face—the face—exact, perfect in its resemblance—of Pauline Mutel, my wife!

And the artist, regaining the upper hand, marvelled solely at the accurate drawing he had just created, thanks to some unknown magic—the finest work which, until now, I had ever put upon a piece of paper!

I was holding the sheet of paper in my right hand and was, without vanity, my own enthusiastic admirer, when Franz, the fish-dealer, entered the room and bid me good-day. He had returned from Dieppe at four o'clock, and was also waiting for the dinner hour while wandering from place to place. Leaning with both

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hands on the table, he gazed at my drawing. Carried away by the secret pleasure I felt I innocently asked him, as if he were a person who would know :

“ Well! How is that? ”

I raised my eyes to his, to question him pleasantly. He had fixed them upon the sheet of paper. His brow wrinkled, as if under some mental effort, and he said in a hollow tone :

“ Who is this? ”

I answered quietly :

“ It is Pauline, my wife. ”

I certainly attached no special meaning to my reply, thinking no more of Otto van Brymans' recent confidence than of that of Pauline Steurs! Franz remained silent. Raising himself slowly from the table, he went with a heavy step to the kitchen. Otto entered a short time after, then his wife, then Fritz, then Dick, the most joyous of the party.

“ Dinner is ready! ” said the landlady, as usual.

Franz came back too.

“ There is something which you have for-

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gotten, since Monsieur has been here," he said in a perfectly natural tone, addressing his sister-in-law, "and if the gendarmes pass, it might cause you to be charged with offending against the regulations of the police! You haven't entered this gentleman's name on the travellers' register!"

The woman burst into a shout of laughter.

"That's true! To us he is always Monsieur Maxime, as he is to little Fritz."

"That is true!" I urged. "You don't even know my name—and yet I am almost your friend! What if I should be a murderer?"

"Oh!" said Otto, laughing in his turn. "You haven't the right face for that!"

Franz was the only person who did not join in the merriment.

He had taken from the bar a book in a grey binding in which the passing customers wrote their various callings. This he placed before me, drawing forward a miserable inkstand and a penholder. And I wrote in the register of the tavern of *The Thieving Magpie*:

Maxime Aubry, artist.

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Coming from: *Tréport.*

Going to: *Dieppe.*

Residing in: *Paris, Rue Campagne-Première.*

Franz van Brymans had resumed his position, both fists resting on the marble top of the table, following with his eyes my hand running over the paper.

I raised my head, as I had done just before, and looked at him.

He had grown pale. But his pallor could have had no meaning, he kept his usual placidity so completely. Closing the register with no sign of haste, he said, with no apparent emotion in his voice:

“There, that’s more correct!”

Pauline invited every one to dinner.

“Come, let us all go to the table!”

It was at this moment that Franz firmly, in a very decided tone, as if he was resolved to be obstinate, said:

“I shall not dine here this evening! I must go back to Dieppe! I was going to do a fine thing! I was on the point of forgetting that I have an appointment with Simon of the Place

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Duquesne, about the gobe I am going to lease from him."

The van Brymans looked at each other in bewilderment. I asked what a gobe was. Otto explained that it was the name given to cavities in the cliffs used by dealers for store-houses.

Franz had turned on his heel, and gone to the stable.

"What ails Franz again to-day?" asked Pauline Steurs. "That errand is a humbug! He wasn't thinking of going to the city ten minutes ago!"

Otto, with an evasive gesture of his two arms bent back along his body, answered:

"How do I know? I'm not in his skin."

The landlady plunged the ladle into the smoking tureen, and said scornfully:

"With Franz, one never knows what is going on."

VI

THE PEOPLE WHO LAUGH AND THE DOG THAT BARKS

I HAVE said that I loved my profession as an artist. I do not believe I said that I loved it above everything else. Once grasped by my subject, nothing counts, neither interest, nor feeling. Nothing distracts me from my task. I have no diversions, and I no longer have any curiosity. Only those who know this peculiar condition will fully understand me.

And the subject which I had to observe and to interpret was a very absorbing one, this cheerless strand, peopled with poverty-stricken people who bore no malice. This was very different from my pictures of Tréport, with its spruce beaches, as neat as a box of toys. I was working with ardour, and no longer thought of the letter from my friend Albert Lebourg, who advised me to visit the Pollet quarter. I thought of

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nothing except what I was doing with actual frenzy. My curiosity concerning the van Brymans brothers was completely blunted. I had forgotten the portrait of my wife, *née* Pauline Mutel, in my portfolio; I had forgotten the chatter of the other Pauline, the landlady—I had forgotten even the incomprehensible antipathy which I felt for Franz, and at meal-times I now confused him with Otto, showing the same cordiality to both.

It is true that for a week he had done everything to accomplish this end. He had suddenly become courteous, almost eager to make himself agreeable to me. It was he who accompanied me to the shore every morning when the tide came in, on account of his business. He tried to interest himself in what I was doing. He had suddenly grown sociable, amiable as far as it was in his capacity to be.

One day he said to me:

“You know, Monsieur Aubry, I have seen the landlady in the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf—the cousin of Mère Vincent, of Tréport. She is very uneasy—but no longer about you, it concerns

herself, that is, to see a room which has been kept for so long a time remain unused! So, to quiet her, I paid the forty francs due for the month. Wasn't that the price agreed upon with Mère Vincent?"

"I thank you."

Another day he casually made the offer:

"Any time that you may want to spend an hour or two in Dieppe, I shall always have a seat in my cart at your disposal, Monsieur Aubry."

For since he had known my name, he took advantage of it and called me "Monsieur Aubry" every minute.

At the inn of *The Thieving Magpie*, the same kindly attentions surrounded me; but as I had enjoyed them from the first moment of my installation they touched me less. To tell the truth, absorbed by my profession, I was a little detached from my surroundings. I no longer paid attention to the conversation. What came into one ear went out through the other.

One day Otto's wife said to her husband before me:

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"What in the world is going on in Franz's head? For some time he has been entirely changed, upon my word."

It was Otto who remarked another time:

"I have never seen Franz so lively! He is hiding something from us! I don't understand a thing about it!"

I scarcely listened to their remarks. Nevertheless I continued to share their family life. They did not spare me a single detail of the daily existence. I knew, approximately, how many eggs the hens had laid during the twenty-four hours, how many appetisers François, the blacksmith, had drunk, and how many games of dominoes he had lost.

"You shall see, Monsieur Aubry," said the landlady, "whether Franz has good taste in buying goods!"

She was unpacking on the kitchen table the bale which Franz had brought back from Dieppe, as he did every year at this time, to renew his own wardrobe, and his brother Otto's.

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It was a double outfit, from head to foot—two caps, two blouses, two woollen jerseys, two pairs of trousers, two pairs of shoes, and even the underclothing which came in pairs, marked F and O, but later white goods—shirts, handkerchiefs, and a lot of miscellaneous things.

And Otto's wife, in the midst of her unpacking, was laughing with delight.

"When you see them dressed in everything new, side by side, you won't be able to distinguish them at all—I tell you so—neither you nor anybody, nor your humble servant, first of all!"

And they went back, with the customers who came in, to the eternal topic of the everlasting resemblance between the van Brymans brothers, of which I was beginning to be a little weary.

But, alas! this was not going to continue for a very long time!

For this is the very simple fact which happened on the 16th of October, the evening before the day that I was found knocked senseless by an unknown hand, under circumstances so

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strange that they made one's head swim, in Dieppe, at the end of the Quay Henri IV.

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Franz had come home from the city in an extraordinarily merry mood, more lively than I had ever seen him, so merry that his sister-in-law murmured:

"Franz acts as if he were a little tipsy."

Franz had a quick ear. He answered:

"A glass too much is very allowable, when one meets an old friend one hasn't seen for ten years! Guess whom I saw, Otto?"

"How do you suppose I can guess?"

"Shoepen, from Antwerp! the sailor Shoepen!"

"Who is Shoepen?" asked Otto's wife.

Otto's placid face brightened, beamed. He stuttered:

"Ah!—That scamp of a Shoepen! Really?" And the memory of his comrade evoked in an instant his youth and the frame in which he had lived it, his native city, the seaport of Antwerp, his Belgium, all his early life.

He explained to his wife:

"Shoepen! We were the same age. We sailed together, with the shipowner Poilly!"

All this was very far away. The shipowner, Shoepen, the coasting-trade, the quays of Antwerp, and the scenery of his native land! But everything came back at once, in a puff of wind borne by a sudden, delicious breeze, which had come from the offing, from over yonder—in that simple name, the sailor Shoepen!

Then Franz began to explain in his turn:

He had just come from Glasgow on a ship loaded with petroleum . . . he was going to sea the next evening . . . and he wanted to see Otto again.

"So do *I* want to see him!" sighed Otto.

And Franz added in a perfectly natural tone:

"He is expecting us to luncheon to-morrow!"

The wife was the first to encourage her husband.

"That will be a chance to wear your new clothes! Only try to control your thirst!"

Turning to me, she added:

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"If Monsieur Aubry would like to take advantage of the opportunity to make a little visit to Dieppe!"

Otto added his arguments to urge the invitation:

"I would show you about the city, and it would give me a lot of pleasure."

And Franz, as if he had only waited to receive his brother and sister-in-law's encouragement, supported them in a thoroughly agreeable fashion:

"Yes, you would give us much pleasure, and you will have an opportunity to pass through the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf, and soothe the anxiety of your landlady, who is beginning to doubt your existence!"

I had certainly no pleasure to expect from seeing the sailor Shoepen—any more than from Mère Vincent's cousin! But a day's rest would be agreeable and, to gratify everybody, I promised to go with them the next day.

And Otto and Franz, with the others, seemed to be very proud of the honour that I was doing them!

I slept badly that night, and had a stupid dream!

I dreamed of my wife, Pauline Mutel . . . Pauline Mutel was Monna Lisa. It was my wife, an adorable woman, with a gentle disposition and a keen intellect, the charming companion of my work. . . . And I owed her a thousand pardons, and worshipped her like a Madonna, ever since her portrait sketched with a few strokes of a pencil had replaced La Joconda in the Louvre. It was an idiotic dream, like all dreams, and angelic into the bargain!

I dreamed that I had received from Albert Lebourg, the landscape artist, a letter which caused me much uneasiness and gave me terrible suffering. He wrote:

I forbid you to go to Dieppe. You must not go to Dieppe, unless you are a man lost to impressionistic painting! The picturesque suburb of Pollet has been completely destroyed by fire. This fire was lighted by the hands of our Under Secretary of State in the Beaux-Arts, and the old sailors of former days who went to Ice-

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land and Newfoundland, have been replaced by Apaches of Charonne! Don't go there or you will be in advance a marked man! And Dubufe, of the National, will no longer put you anywhere except in the cellars, with those who have talent!

All these incoherences had fatigued me, and I woke at dawn, completely overwhelmed with lassitude. It is evident that I no longer thought any more of this ridiculous nightmare. If I relate it now, it is not to give the occurrence importance—after the happening—but only for the pleasure of the shrewd people who will amuse themselves, if they choose, in ascribing to it the weight of a warning!

For my part, if I were allowed to laugh—after what has happened!—I should still affirm that we must not put faith in dreams, for I am certain that I shall never replace the Vinci, in our National Museum, and I also consider it positive that it will never enter the brain of a minister of the Beaux-Arts—however great a foe of the picturesque he may be supposed—to

imitate Nero in a wretched suburb inhabited by fishermen, far away from the Rue de Valois!

There are so many marvels to be destroyed in old Paris, within easy reach of the hand.

I found the van Brymans brothers, dressed in their best, ready for departure.

They were airing their new togs for this season, identical from their caps to their shoe-strings. And they were, in reality, more astonishing, more bewildering in their perfect resemblance than ever. I carried the jest so far as to say to them:

"Oh! no—allow me—this time I won't be taken in!"

I seized the right hand of each, and when I had seen the silver ring incrustated in the swollen flesh of the little finger, I said:

"Good-morning, Otto!"

"You are a sly fellow!" sneered Franz.

And he buckled around his loins a heavy leather money-belt of the old-fashioned sort, distended with coins, which he was going to deposit in the Savings Bank.

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"You'll be robbed!" said his sister-in-law.

The woman laughed. . . . Otto laughed. . . . Their little son Fritz was playing on the door-step. Everybody seemed merry over the start. Only Dick, the spaniel, appeared sorrowful. Animals are as great egotists as people. He ought to have been ashamed not to share our pleasure.

We got into the new cart. I took my place on the seat, between Franz, who grasped the reins, and Otto. Pauline waved her handkerchief to wish us a pleasant trip. And as the vehicle moved Dick, with a mournful, prolonged barking, howled piteously, which is said to be a bad omen!

I turned and saw the landlady holding the spaniel by the collar and punishing him by cuffing his ears.

I don't believe in signs any more than I do in dreams.

Nevertheless, I ask myself—at a distance from the event now

VII

THE SAILOR SHOEPEN

HE was a short, stocky man, with a red face framed by a russet beard, and eyes which expressed the utmost stupidity. He had long arms, which he allowed to hang by his sides,—ending in immense fists. A cap of waxed leather drawn down to his eyebrows, his jersey, crossed by a red and yellow badge, and his long woollen leggings completed the appearance of the good, big, dull brute, who shows you in two minutes' observation that man descends from the chimpanzee.

Such was the aspect of the sailor Shoepen, in the yard of the stables where Franz was in the habit of keeping his horse and cart, when we arrived there toward eleven o'clock in the morning. I had had time to pass through the whole width of the city, across the two bridges, and follow the Quay Henri IV, at whose extreme

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end, beyond the naval station, was the fish-dealer's cart-shed. My first impression of the city which Duquesne illustrated was not extremely brilliant. I received at first sight the impression we all have at the view of every seaport, that is, a curious and incomprehensible medley, from the outset, of something seen before, and yet unlike any other port.

We got out of the cart and Otto and Shoepen, their eyes shining with pleasure, congratulated each other endlessly. It was both touching and ridiculous . . . Shoepen appeared to stare at me as if I were some curious animal. Otto explained what sort of person I was, and the sailor did not know how to show his respect for me. And this was more ridiculous than touching. Franz knew the right places for good cheer, and took us to a restaurant of his choosing where the fare was abundant, the cider hard, and the wine very dear.

I could make no pretence of rivalling my three companions in eating, and as for drink, I contented myself with admiring their way of mixing all sorts of liquors, which punctuated

from time to time—like commas in the body of a long sentence—the glasses of cider brandy called “trous normands.”

Oh! the conversation was not intensely interesting—at least to me. It was the continual recalling of their childhood in Antwerp, then by hook and by crook, what they had done in life, each in his own person, for ten years! The sailor Shoepen was surprised at one thing: this was that he had not met one of the van Brymans brothers in Dieppe before. For he knew Dieppe as well as he did his own pocket! Since he had been in Glasgow, on the *Arbalète*, he came there three or four times a year. Before that he was working in the woodlands of the north, at Dunkerque, and landed there every three months, too.

“Chance!” said Otto sorrowfully.

“Chance!” repeated Franz.

What interested me was the colour of the scene, the low-ceilinged hall of the popular restaurant, filled with clamour, where the fish-dealers, the sailors, the peasants from the neighbourhood, chewing noisily, interrupting them-

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selves in their eating to bellow, each louder than the other, with mouths half full, roars of laughter which made the dishes rattle on the tables. And I thought of the greasy interiors of the minor Flemish masters, whose touch was so passionately vivid, as I watched the maid-servants in their white aprons moving among the rows of chairs, and answering with blunt repartees the free speeches of the customers.

I admired the appetite of the sailor Shoepen and his method of cutting with the aid of his knife, a solid blade like a sabre, the pieces he engulfed in his narrow mouth, and which swelled his cheeks.

"It is sharp!" said Franz, taking the knife and examining it.

He played with the catch, and inspected with keen interest the horn handle from which hung a copper medal, engraved with the sailor's name and conventional matriculation on board his ship: *Shoepen*, 8.

"With this," said Franz, returning it to him, "you can, as occasion requires, cut your bread, cut a rope, or rip up a shark."

"With this," replied Shoepen proudly, "I could cut iron."

And he planted the blade of pointed steel in the oak of the table.

Franz was the amphitryon; but to fulfil my part of the reckoning, I ordered a bottle of champagne. At the word champagne Shoepen's face wore a look of amazement; his eyes sparkled with sudden delight, and he passed his tongue like a gourmand over his closely-shaven lips.

Otto did not wish to be left behind, and proposed coffee, but the fish-dealer protested.

"I am the one who invited you."

"No," persisted Otto, "let each do his share!"

"I said no, and no it is," retorted Franz. "We don't see Shoepen every day. Come, we two will play for the coffee, in five games of nine points."

The dominoes were brought, the bottles of brandy, rum, and kirschwasser, the coffee of three colours. The sight of them alarmed me. I thought the drinking bout would last a good half-hour.

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"I am going to take a walk to the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf," said I, "and see the room the landlady has kept for me."

"If you like, Shoepen will go with you and show you where it is," replied Franz, "since he knows Dieppe as well as we do."

The sailor scratched his red pow; he was divided between the fear of losing one of the bumpers which were going the rounds and the vague desire to make himself agreeable to me. He decided almost grudgingly.

"Certainly, since I know Dieppe as well as I do my own pocket."

And he rose with difficulty.

"There is no necessity!" I replied.

But he then made it a point of honour to show me that he no longer hesitated between the drinks of brandy and the honour of escorting me. So we left the van Brymans brothers absorbed in the difficult calculations of the noble Norman game.

I was very glad to get into the fresh air! Shoepen said to me:

"It's in Pollet,—the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf!"

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We recrossed the bridges and reached a somewhat poor-looking house. The sign of the Hurteaux woman showed me that these were the furnished lodgings to which Mère Vincent of Tréport had sent my trunks.

The landlady gave us a warm welcome. Ah! so this was really I, the Monsieur Aubry whom she had been expecting three weeks! She was delighted to make my acquaintance! . . . And she ran on into an obsequious garrulity which I cut short by asking for my keys.

"I will show you," she said. "You would never find the room. I have lodged you outside of the house—that you may feel more free."

She cast a distrustful glance at my companion.

"This sailor is with you, perhaps?"

The man laughed, a laugh which was a positive grimace.

"Of course I am with this gentleman."

She guessed by the knit cap of red and yellow:

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"You are on an English ship?"

"I am Shoepen," answered the sailor simply.

The room which had been reserved for me, outside of the house itself, looked upon a little garden. It was reached by a wooden staircase from the street. And I was delighted with the landlady's idea of having reserved for me this independent lodging. She said again:

"You can keep the keys, Monsieur. My cousin Vincent has told me who you are. You are at home, sir."

She left us, not without having cast a last disapproving glance at Shoepen who was visibly uneasy, plainly tortured between the idea of doing me honour and the more definite one of sharing in the drinking bout, which was the inevitable consequence of the games of dominoes which were played yonder.

The room pleased me at this first inspection. It had an eastern exposure, a high ceiling, and was very airy; an ivy vine climbed to the window-sill. And I already imagined spending the month of November there.

Shoepen was turning in every direction, as

if he were on a gridiron. At last he said ingenuously:

"You know that Franz and Otto will wait for us."

I took pity on his thirst, and we went back to the restaurant.

I was surprised to find Otto alone at the table.

"Where is Franz?" asked Shoeopen.

"He has gone to attend to some business," replied Otto, "at Notre-Dame du Bon Secours, about the gobe he rented from Simon of the Place Duquesne."

He motioned to the glasses of each, which had remained in their respective places. I excused myself.

"Thank you, Otto, but I am not in the habit of drinking so much!"

And I passed mine over to the sailor, who tossed them off one after another, with perfect calmness and a sure conviction of his own importance.

Otto, flushed by the hearty meal and the liquor, smiled.

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"Oh, you haven't changed a whit, Shoepen."

"I'm going to find Franz under the cliff," replied Shoepen quietly.

"That's right," Otto approved, "and during that time I'll walk about the city with Monsieur Aubry. It will get the numbness out of our legs."

"Our legs and our ideas!" I assented in my turn.

And I clasped the hand which the sailor held out to me as one would that of a worthy fellow whom one had met by chance two hours before, and would probably never see again in the whole course of a lifetime.

I shook hands with the sailor Shoepen in farewell and wished him a pleasant voyage, since he was to leave the port that very evening. Otto's good wishes were naturally more eager and more elaborate than mine. They went on endlessly and were becoming touching and ridiculous.

As if once were not enough, Shoepen held out his big paw to me once more.

"I hope to see you again."

"I hope I shall see you again," I repeated mechanically.

Indeed I could not foresee that I should ever again behold that good-natured drunken face, that I should twice more in my life see this Shoepen, and the last time under really incomprehensible conditions.

VIII

SHE

I MIGHT, in this place, take advantage of my profession as artist and depict in a few vividly coloured pages, descriptive to one's heart's content, and absolutely exact, the special aspects of the city which my guide, Otto van Brymans, made me visit.

Besides the fact that this would possess only a secondary interest, such an undertaking, which would be that of a conscientious literary worker, would have the disadvantage of delaying my narrative. It is, therefore, useless for me to go into raptures over the ancient donjon transformed into barracks, where Otto took me, after having passed the railway station, which seemed to me dirty and uncomfortable. The principal street had some charm on account of its bustle. The casino shocked me as an Oriental horror, and I really breathed freely only at the sight of

the seashore and the green lawns, extending harmoniously along a road bordered with cosmopolitan hotels, called, if I am not mistaken, the Rue Aguado.

I do not remember, without a slight touch of fear, the tobacco factory into which my guide wanted to drag me by force, in spite of the horror with which the building inspired me.

From the shore to the quays little cross streets, cool and quiet, interested me with their tottering huts. But my interest doubled when we emerged into a small square park, thoroughly primitive in appearance, which was the Place du Moulin-à-Vent, whose gable-roofed houses were nearly all of the period when the rich ship-owner, Ango, received as a wealthy merchant Francis I in the city.

I took in with my glance the little space enclosed by the shops of fruit-dealers, an old-clothes man, a laundress at the right and, on the left, at the foot of stone staircases, narrow and worn, the wives of sailors, seated on the lowest step, busy in mending nets with a sharp netting needle.

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When Otto, nudging me with his elbow, winked his eye slyly, and motioning to the neat front of a fancy-goods shop, whispered in a low tone:

“That is she!”

I turned my head and saw *this*—this which dazed me and nailed me to the spot.

On the threshold of a store with clear glass windows, behind which were arranged in a graceful medley ivories and rudely painted shells, stood, leaning against the frame, a woman about thirty years old, with a winning smile.

And this woman was Pauline Mutel, from whom I had been divorced three years before.

I should not know how to describe the impression this sight made upon me. At first it was bewilderment, followed by a brief uneasiness in which, I believe, confusion was the dominant feeling.

But the woman, having seen me, was apparently seized with the same confusion and struck by the same sudden shock, for she flushed crim-

son, turned away, and hastily shut the door of her shop!

I still stood there, with my eyes hypnotised upon the attractive sign: *Souvenirs of Dieppe*. Certainly this was a souvenir which I had not expected! I turned toward my companion, and my voice, which I tried to render less hesitating, imitated like an echo:

“That is she!”

And I looked Otto van Brymans straight in the eyes. They maintained their artless expression. I saw only a sort of amusement, which he emphasised by adding:

“She isn’t bad-looking, is she? And Franz could not expect to do better!”

I had the certainty that the worthy Otto knew nothing more, and could know nothing farther.

In saying: “That is she!” he had meant only: “That is my brother’s sweetheart, the one of whom I told you—the woman to whom he promised marriage.” And I, in repeating: “That is she!” even had I gone beyond his purpose, he could not possibly

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divine the significance I had put into it. He added:

"Did you see how she blushed? No doubt she mistook me for Franz."

I turned my tongue several times in my mouth in order to keep from answering: "But she could not have taken me for any one except Maxime Aubry, her divorced husband!" I controlled myself as well as I could, took him by the arm, and said somewhat drily:

"Let us go and find Franz! I have seen enough of this city, which no longer interests me at all."

He seemed surprised at my words. I was astonished at my own emotion and tried to recognise myself in the contradictory feelings which agitated me.

It is always after a blow that events make an impression upon you. I remembered Otto's remarks concerning the similar Christian name of my wife and the fish-dealer's sweetheart, and his exclamation: "It is extraordinary!" to which I had replied with what I thought good sense.

Besides, I should have found it difficult to put any good sense into this singular adventure! Vainly I asked myself by what routes a woman who had never been sensual, and whom I knew was virtuous to the core, had reached this point! Then, as there is always vanity in the relations between man and woman, at the basis of what is called love, I felt irritated at her choosing this bumpkin. I was possessed by a dull, irrational hatred of this brute who had replaced me in the possession of Pauline.

And against Pauline, whom I had so entirely forgotten, I experienced a bitterness which I had never had, even in the time of our differences and our separation!

Otto and I went down toward the Quay Henri IV without uttering another word.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked.

"Of nothing!" I replied.

I was thinking of Franz, of the instinctive antipathy with which he had inspired me when I saw him. I was thinking of the scene of my inscribing my name in the traveller's register, which had followed the scene of Pauline

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Mutel's portrait, so cleverly made from pure caprice.

Oh! I recalled the slightest details now, and these details explained his attitude—and mine! He had turned pale at the sight of his sweetheart's portrait, as she had just blushed when she saw me! But I recognised the fact that this man was endowed with a considerable degree of self-control to have since displayed coolness so remarkable, and kept his secret as well as he had done; for I admitted that I myself should have been wholly incapable of it. My extreme emotion, at this moment, was the best possible proof of that.

We were going to the stable where the fish-dealer put up his horse and cart, at the end of the Quay Henri IV. The sight of the piers and docks, filled with shipping whose masts were decked with flags of various colours, did not interest me. I did not even notice it. I repeated stupidly, my mind far away:

“Let us make haste! I am in a hurry to get back to Biville!”

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Otto answered in the calm, quiet voice of the countryman to whom minutes are always long and time indefinite:

“ You are in a tremendous hurry, Monsieur Aubry ! ”

IX

WHAT HAPPENED

DAY was drawing to a close. We waited at least half an hour at the harbour, but Franz did not come. At last he got out of a yawl which he had taken to cross the channel. He was not alone; he still had in tow the sailor Shoe-pen, of whom I had thought I was rid.

Franz appeared to be vexed by some mischance. He scratched his head to express his annoyance, and said to his brother:

“Here’s another provoking thing! Simon won’t be at home until nine o’clock this evening to sign the lease for the gobe.”

Otto made a wry face to show his sympathy in the annoyance; and turning to me, remarked:

“This won’t suit Monsieur Aubry!”

“I shall be compelled to do as you do!” I answered sullenly.

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Shoepen, delighted at the prospect of dinner, clumsily interposed:

"The *Arbalète* will not sail until midnight, at high tide. That will give me the pleasure of being with you longer!"

The pleasure was evidently on his side, and in spite of my secret irritation, I was obliged to endure another carousal. I was sufficiently master of myself not to let my feelings appear too plainly. It was not in public that I desired to have an explanation with Franz van Brymans. And as to lessons in impassibility, he immediately gave me one which really surpassed the limits of coolness.

Otto, with a sly smile intended to be flattering, said to him:

"We saw her just now when we were going through the Place Moulin-à-Vent, and Monsieur Aubry congratulates you!"

Franz looked at me very frankly, gently shrugged his shoulders, and showed himself foolishly artless by answering indifferently:

"All that sort of talk is nonsense."

I, too, looked at Franz boldly. Not a mus-

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cle of his placid face had moved, and I was startled by his tranquillity.

So, I reasoned, here is a man who, for more than a week, has known beyond doubt that I am the former husband of his sweetheart, Pauline Mutel. He knows that I have certainly been aware of it for an hour—through accident; yet he remains in my presence as if he knew nothing! And I was not sure at this minute, in spite of my resolution, of maintaining to a wary eye the same apparent calmness. I felt myself inferior to this brute, and wondered of what such an individual, in such a situation, might be capable!

I needed to recover my strength; I tried to benumb myself by drinking and entered into a rude rivalry with the sailor Shoepen.

I really believe that, under any other circumstances, I should have been drunk before the end of the meal; but I was in such a state of enervation that it doubled my resistance to the effects of the alcohol. And I was the first to urge on the drinking; I who was annoyed to be in this company, so repugnant to my tastes and

my mode of life, applauded Franz's proposal when he offered to take us to the pot-houses of the harbour to finish the evening.

As for Otto, he was visibly intoxicated. At least I thought so, amid my own drunkenness. But the sailor Shoeppen, who took double bumpers, soon reached the height of his inebriety. What I can affirm—so far as such a statement can have any value—is that Franz, alone, kept his senses.

Of the scenes which took place in the dives to which we went after dinner, I have retained only vague memories when certain facts impressed me sufficiently to recall them.

For instance, I recollect perfectly that, to settle the account, Franz having opened the leather belt which girdled his waist and drawn from this money-bag a handful of gold and silver, his brother Otto addressed this reproach to him:

“What! You haven't found time to put your money in the Savings Bank? What have you been doing all the afternoon?”

I can still see the sparkling eyes of the sailor

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Shoepen at the glitter of this little fortune, and have remembered his exclamation:

"A good haul for the fellow who had the pluck."

And I can hear Otto's answer:

"The man who would knock Franz down isn't born."

I recollect also this fact. In some tavern which I no longer know, Shoepen got into a quarrel with some Danish sailors. I recall that, having drawn his knife, the long, thin blade with the horn handle bearing a copper medal with his name engraved and his matriculation: *Shoepen*, 8, it was Franz, still admirably master of himself, who disarmed him, put the dangerous weapon quietly in his pocket, and said:

"That's enough for to-day, Shoepen. I'm going to take you back to the quay, so that you won't miss going on board!"

The sailor swore at him. Oaths hailed. A general fight was perhaps about to follow. But in the strong arms of Franz van Brymans, the fish-dealer, the drunken sailor was only a defenceless child.

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This violent scene had slightly dispelled my intoxication, and I realised the ignominy of my situation.

We were now in the street.

"I am going to help you," said Otto to his brother.

"No," replied Franz drily. "Go and harness the mare with Monsieur Aubry. I'll take him on board alone."

I was so sickened that a ray of reason entered my mind.

"I!" I said, "I ought to have thought of it before! I will go and spend the night in the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf. My room is waiting for me there, after all!"

"That wouldn't do," chuckled Franz. "Better go back with us, as you have waited till this time!"

I was vainly rummaging the pockets of my trousers. The keys which my landlady had given me were no longer there. They had vanished.

"Well, now!" I said angrily, "I have lost my keys!"

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And while Franz turned to the right of the fish-market, dragging the reeling sailor, Otto and I walked along the deserted quays to reach the stable. The cool night wind blew into our faces and revived us. I began to recover my senses. I could not tell what time it was, even approximately. But I know that very few lights were shining in the windows looking out upon the harbour, that there were no longer any people passing through the streets, and that the absolute silence of the docks sleeping in the moonlight filled me with keen anxiety.

It is probable that the reaction of the sharp air produced a contrary effect on my companion, for I noticed in crossing the threshold of the stable, that he was stumbling at every step.

We had much difficulty in finding the lantern, and still more in lighting it. As to harnessing Franz's mare, which was out of patience after so long a time of waiting, Otto gave it up after trying in vain for fifteen minutes.

We were plunged in darkness but faintly lighted by the big iron lantern I held in my hand like a cresset—dull and stupid, when at

the end of I know not how long a time, we at last heard steps outside.

“ Ah! there is Franz,” said Otto; “ that isn’t bad luck! ”

I was standing with my back to the door, if my memory is correct. I say that my back must have been turned to the door, because before having seen any one enter—Franz or any other person—I had the sudden sensation of complete unconsciousness.

It was like an enormous mass which came down upon my skull, and I rolled senseless in the straw, felled by an unknown hand! I had no perception of what had happened when I heard from Otto’s lips the unfinished cry of horror:

“ Mur——”

X

IN WHICH AN EXAMINING MAGISTRATE UNDERTAKES TO SHOW ME THAT I AM NOT THE VICTIM

I OPENED my eyes and saw that I was lying in a large white, bare room. I turned my head toward the high, uncurtained window, and was going to raise my hand to my forehead, when a gentle hand, infinitely gentle and yet authoritative, was laid on my arm to stop the gesture.

The wide cap of a Sister of Charity bent toward my pillow.

A low, level voice ordered:

"Don't speak! Don't fatigue yourself!"

I had sufficient knowledge of my strength to reply:

"But I can talk, I assure you!"

It seemed to me that I was awaking as strong as before, from a terrible nightmare. I felt only a discomfort, the discomfort of the linen

bandages which encircled my head; and I attempted another movement of my hand toward it.

"Keep quiet!" insisted the Sister, this time in a dry voice.

At these words, a man entered.

"Aha!" he said, "the revival is complete!"

And he examined me with a look not wholly expressive of good-will. In an instant he had relieved me of the dressing. He inspected the wound, took the temperature, and concluded:

"One might say that there will be none this evening! You have escaped finely. One centimeter lower, and your business would have been settled!"

He pressed my temple around the bruised wound, whose dressing he quickly renewed. Then he added:

"You can get up!"

I asked him for some information. I wanted to know under what circumstances I had been taken to the hospital. His face grew stern, and he answered harshly:

"That is not in my department!"

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Then, turning on his heel, he went out with the nurse.

I was in a hurry to get away from this place. Rising, I dressed without much difficulty, though my head was still light, shaken by the shock I had received. Through the window I saw a magnificent old garden, in which convalescent patients were walking in avenues of linden trees, talking together. I noticed that all eyes were turned toward my window. They seemed to be discussing something animatedly, and I no longer doubted that my adventure was known and furnished the subject for all the conversation.

At this instant the physician returned; but he was no longer alone. Three men in frock coats, with somewhat stern bearing, accompanied him.

Passing near me, he whispered:

"The prosecuting officers."

I was speedily satisfied as to the direction my affair was going to take, and did not doubt that these three persons had come to show me the attentions which justice owes to the victims of a

crime so odious as the one whose object I had been.

The most important, apparently, of the three men, judging from the obsequiousness which the others showed him, was a short, stout old fellow, who moved about the room, gesticulating extravagantly. He had a good-natured, ruddy face, which was trying to appear terrible, goggle-eyes, by turns menacing and merry. A pale, distinguished-looking man called him Monsieur Marathon in a familiar tone, though tinged with respect.

Monsieur Marathon calling him the "prosecuting attorney," I needed little perspicacity to divine that the fat, bustling man was the examining magistrate who had charge of investigating my case.

As to the third silent personage, a by no means good-looking man, smelling of snuff, it was easy to recognise in him, thanks to his obsequiousness, the clerk attached to the majesty of justice to write down the deposition which they had come to claim from my truthfulness.

The three men had taken their seats in front

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of a little table, inviting me to sit down opposite to them, and it was in an almost threatening tone which, from the first, put me out of countenance, that the magistrate asked my name and Christian names, which I gave without hesitation.

"So it is you, the artist," said the jovial Monsieur Marathon.

And, without farther formalities, he asked me to tell him what I knew of the dark business in which I was mixed up, and by what combination of circumstances I had been found senseless, at five o'clock in the morning, in a stable on the Quay Henri IV.

"In spite of my desire to enlighten justice," I replied, "it is absolutely impossible for me to tell you by whom I have been attacked! If I connect one after another the various circumstances which have surrounded the crime upon my person, I do not say that we shall not arrive at a serious presumption. But I could not go beyond that."

"That's it! That's just it!" interrupted the magistrate, "and that is also our opinion. . . ."

A presumption . . . nothing more . . . at present! ”

“That is why I entreat you, Judge,” I went on, “to attach to my deposition only a value—entirely relative—the value of an opinion—which may be erroneous! ”

“Don’t worry,” retorted the magistrate. “We are quite decided upon that, my officers and I! ”

I did not at all understand the vaguely aggressive tone that these men employed in their interruptions. And I gave the three attentive personages a truthful account, which has been read, of my pleasure trip to Dieppe with the van Brymans brothers—without omitting a single one of the details.

I was surprised at the sneer exchanged between the attorney and the judge when I came to speak of the sailor Shoepen. My surprise became bewilderment, when I saw these sneers redouble when I mentioned the incident of the Place Moulin-à-Vent, and spoke of Pauline Mutel, my divorced wife. But my surprise and bewilderment became positive stupefaction when,

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having finished my truthful and exact narrative, Monsieur Marathon let fall these words:

"Ah! What you tell us is sufficiently ingenious—though puerile, and utterly childish!"

And my stupefaction became terror when, after a silence, I heard him add:

"But I will undertake, my fine fellow, to show you that you are not the victim!"

The red-faced man had turned toward the pale, distinguished-looking one and, patting him pleasantly on the shoulder, said:

"You didn't know Percevent, your predecessor, monsieur? Ah! we had a very exciting case in those days, the case of the mime Properce, in which I had lost some of my prestige! But I hope to recover it in this one, and to profit by the experience which I have gained in my difficult career. You will see!"

He gave him a sheet of paper, which the cautious clerk had prepared for him.

"Doctor," said he, "is this man in a condition to bear the fatigue of the examination?"

"As well as you or I, Judge!" replied the physician.

"Very well!" said Monsieur Marathon.

And signing with a rapid hand an order of arrest, he looked spitefully at me, and declared in a surly tone which was intended to be solemn:

"Citizen Aubry! You are accused of presumption of assassination upon the person of Franz van Brymans, the lover of your divorced wife, *née* Pauline Mutel, who was found stabbed this morning, the 17th of the present month, before the door of his sweetheart, in the Place Moulin-à-Vent, and this with the presumed complicity of the aforesaid Pauline Mutel, and other accomplices whom justice will undertake to discover!"

Pale with horror, I stammered:

"Franz!—Franz murdered!—And Otto, what has become of him?"

The judge sneered, as he had sneered at the names of Shoepen and Pauline Mutel, then he replied:

"When you make up your mind to tell us, we shall be glad to know."

This time I no longer had the Sister of Char-

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ity near me to prevent the movement, and I raised my hand to my forehead with the confused feeling that my skull was going to burst more certainly than under the blow dealt the evening before by an unknown hand.

XI

THE UTILITY OF A LAWYER FOR THE DEFENCE

WITHIN the four walls of my cell, in the prison to which I was immediately transferred, I had abundant leisure to reflect upon my extraordinary adventure. But it was useless to give myself up to all sorts of hypotheses. I could find no meaning in any of them.

To keep solely to the fact, this was established: that the evening before, in the stable on the Quay Henri IV, in the company of Otto van Brymans, when we were waiting for the return of his brother Franz, who had gone to take the sailor Shoepen back on board the *Arbalète*, I had been struck and left for dead. And this one point was all.

In order to seek, with any chances of success, the author of this crime, it was necessary to establish the motive for the assault. I knew only these three men in the city, where I was setting

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foot for the first time—these three men and my divorced wife, Pauline Mutel. So I must restrict conjectures to this circle; and the only one that I could remove at once, with certainty, was that concerning Otto, who had been surprised at the same time as I, and whose cry to the assassin was the last light which I retained of the drama.

As for the sailor Shoepen, it was difficult to imagine a motive for such an act! Besides the fact that he was in a state of intoxication which would have rendered the accomplishment hard for him, he was in the hands of Franz and, on the part of a good sort of fellow, whose principal fault seemed to be drunkenness, the deed seemed incomprehensible.

But at the point where I had been compelled to stop I found myself confronted with a problem still more perplexing: to define the part of the van Brymans brothers in such an occurrence, the part played by Otto with me, and the part played by Franz with Otto. Now, I could know nothing about this at present!

There remained the third hypothesis, which

was this: I had been struck by the person for whom we were waiting, by the only individual who was to come at that hour, to that place; by Franz van Brymans, the fish-dealer.

And this hypothesis, at least, was strengthened by an apparent motive. Franz was the lover of my divorced wife! Franz knew that I was aware of it, from that evening, about six hours before the crime! And it was natural that this should be the only reasonable supposition which had come to my mind after I recovered consciousness! I did not go so far as to accuse Pauline Mutel of complicity; I had no reasons for doing so, and nothing could induce me to take the step! My hypothesis was dubious, subject to error! I had said so to the magistrate in advance, and I had been wise, since it had required a very trifling effort on his part to make it crumble immediately, by announcing that Franz himself had been stabbed in front of Pauline Mutel's house.

In the presence of this problem, more bewildering than the first one, I resigned myself to do no more thinking. My head ached, and I

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felt like an automaton in the hands of a blind fate. I had nothing to sustain me in this time of adversity, except the knowledge of my innocence, and I permitted myself a little optimism, leaving to events alone the task of demonstrating it.

A short time after my imprisonment I received a visit from the lawyer who was charged with what I believed would be an easy defence.

His name was Maître Croulebarbe. A mild young man, with a sympathetic face, whose rapid glances through his eyeglasses were shy and kindly. His voice was warm and winning. He had a pitying tone which touched me deeply as he received my first impulse of protest. As I had never in my life been familiar with the formidable apparatus of the law, I was excusable in mistaking for compassion what was merely a form of his thankless trade.

He made me repeat, for his use, the detailed narrative of the employment of my time, just as I had done before Judge Marathon, and when I had finished, he took off his eyeglasses, wiped them methodically, and muttered:

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"In fact, the presumptions upon which the prosecution depends are somewhat similar to those which you employ for your defence!"

I started at these words.

"For my defence! But I have no reason to defend myself!"

"It is necessary," he replied gently, "and I beg you, my dear client, to bring to bear upon it all your attention and all your calmness. I have said that the hypotheses of the prosecution and of the defence which I have the honour to assume are the same—which comes back to saying that they are diametrically opposed! You put forth the supposition of having been struck down by Franz van Brymans, your wife's lover, and naturally, your conjecture immediately returns against you, since Franz has been found dead before Pauline Mutel's door—your divorced wife!—he, too, struck—but also stabbed—by some unknown hand! So you have, there is no doubt, a first disadvantage. Nevertheless, don't be troubled—the prosecution is still only in the tentative period, and so long as you have not confessed . . ."

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"Confessed! Confessed what?"

A cold perspiration broke out over my whole body.

Then Maître Croulebarbe, with a pleasant gesture, went on:

"Besides, I am going to tell you about the prosecution and the course it is now pursuing. Follow me carefully! It is not my own reasoning that I am stating, but that of the officers of the law. For, at present, I have no right to have an opinion!"

My lawyer could not have used more provoking language. I understood that he did not believe in my innocence, that his sympathy was feigned, and I had the feeling of being still alone against all.

He continued in a demonstrative tone, dwelling upon each word, separating each sentence with marked precision.

"At the same hour in the morning a dead man and a wounded man were found. A rapid investigation informed the officers of justice of the significant fact that the wounded man is the husband of the dead man's sweetheart—that for

three weeks he had been, if one may say so, his guest—that just before the crime he had spent the whole day in his company, going to the places of the worst repute in the city! What conclusion, other than the one which horrifies you,—that the husband is the assassin of the lover,—would you expect the examining magistrates to arrive at, I ask you?”

At first I did not know what to answer. I had been so unfortunate with my first insinuation, so quickly reduced to nonentity, that I was becoming circumspect, even while talking with the man who was to be my defender! Nevertheless, I ventured timidly:

“But the deuce! There are other elements in the affair besides myself and Franz! There is Otto van Brymans! There is the sailor Shoepen!”

“The misfortune is,” replied the lawyer, “that they are not here at present! Certainly it is known, from the first testimony collected, that they were your companions in debauch all day yesterday . . .”

“ Debauch ? ”

“ And the police are looking for them. But their disappearance, far from being favourable to you, only deepens the mystery. The prosecution does not gainsay it. It recognises the obscure points which the defence opposes to it, and perceives that the presence of these two figures in the drama—at least we like to imagine them as such—would probably throw light upon what is hitherto incomprehensible in your statements, which are the only ones recorded! They have telegraphed to Glasgow, on the information of the Danish sailors ashore, with whom you had a quarrel, to know whether Shoepen is really on the *Arbalète*, in which case he will be arrested when he leaves the ship. As for the victim’s brother, he has not appeared at his home at Biville-sur-Mer, where his weeping wife, briefly questioned by the gendarmes, early in the day, could not give the slightest information. A summons to appear having reached her, she must be examined by Monsieur Marathon this afternoon. Meanwhile, your baggage at *The Thieving Magpie* has been searched and nothing com-

promising found—at least I venture to hope so!”

“But the part of my wife, *née* Pauline Mutel?” I asked abruptly.

“The part of your wife? Hum!” Maître Croulebarde hesitated. . . . “It is somewhat ticklish. . . . She showed an embarrassment sufficiently evident to arouse every suspicion of her sincerity. She at first declared that she had not seen her lover, Franz van Brymans, the evening before, then that she had heard nothing, during the night, of the scene which took place in front of her door. Unfortunately for her, her neighbours on the Place Moulin-à-Vent came to testify that, contrary to what usually happened, their attention had been attracted by this peculiarity—that the lamp had remained lighted all night in her chamber in the second story. It was then that, retracting her first statement, she pleaded an indisposition which had kept her awake all night. On being pressed with questions, she attributed this indisposition to being startled the evening before, by seeing you pass before her windows in the company of Franz,

since she had lost sight of you since your divorce."

"That may be true," I replied, "except one detail: it is that it was in the company of Otto, and not of Franz, that she saw me in the Place Moulin-à-Vent."

"Yes, yes," said the lawyer, "I know what a complication the extraordinarily striking resemblance between the twin brothers adds to this dark affair! But Monsieur Marathon will understand how to investigate it. He is a skilful man already trained in a case which aroused quite an excitement formerly—the affair of the mime Properce. As for your former wife, who was arrested immediately as accused of complicity, she formally recognised the corpse of Franz, the fish-dealer, by the usual objects that he generally wore on his person: his leather belt, a sort of money-bag . . ."

"Empty?"

"Empty . . . his nickel watch . . . his knife, etc. Now, my dear client, have you any special confidence to give me, any recommendation to make?"

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"In the first place," I said, "I have one last question to ask you.—How was Franz van Brymans murdered?"

"Franz van Brymans," replied Maître Croulebarbe, "was found lying on the pavement, his arms crossways, stabbed by a long knife with a notch, left stuck in the wound—a knife with a horn handle finished by a little copper medal, bearing this engraved inscription . . ."

"*Shoepen*, 8! . . . Shoepen's knife?" I cried, suddenly startled.

"As far as may be supposed! Still this discovery suggests extreme care, for it is not often the custom of murderers to leave thus openly the manifest proof of their crime! One might say on this occasion—it was too apparent—plainly on purpose!"

"That is true!" I replied, recovering all my assurance at this revelation, which was, to me, an actual one!

And I rubbed my hands joyfully.

To the foolish presumptions of the stupid Monsieur Marathon, I now opposed presump-

tions that were also foolish, but wholly contradictory. Yet I carefully avoided mentioning them and, making up my mind to face the surprises of an examination which was reserving some for me, I answered my devoted defender with a touch of humour:

"Yes, I have a special confidence to give you.—It is that I know the murderer of Franz van Brymans. And I have, besides, a recommendation to make to you, that is, not to open your lips about it to any person, and especially not to inform your Monsieur Marathon!"

"And this is, in your opinion? . . ."

anxiously asked the lawyer.

"Franz himself!" I replied, playing the dry joker.

Maître Croulebarbe seemed vexed; he thought the jest ill-timed, and remarked:

"You are not serious!"

Then he added:

"But I would rather see you in this frame of mind than in the one where I found you just now—overwhelmed and defenceless."

XII

IN THE PRESENCE OF THE CORPSE

MOST assuredly I had regained possession of myself. The stupor which the abominable accusation of an over-hasty examining magistrate had caused in me gave way to a clearer view of the difficult situation in which I was placed. Strong in my innocence, I recovered the dignity which had deserted me in the face of the charge.

I perceived that this accusation, built up haphazard, on vague probabilities, must crumble of itself. I understood that, being the only one of the four heroes of this mysterious adventure in the hands of a blind justice, it was almost logical that this justice should endeavour, by every means, to draw from me a first explanation. And I reached the point of excusing the initial errors of the investigation.

But I also decided that I should lose my time and trouble if I tried to correct them, and con-

cluded that the better plan was no longer to defend myself uselessly, but to leave this difficult matter to the weakness of the magistrate's arguments, which would crumble and melt away as the investigation proceeded.

While Otto van Brymans, who had disappeared, and Shoepen, who had reshipped, would not cast even a little light upon the obscurity of the drama, it was vain to spend myself to no purpose.

And my dignity, which had just permitted itself an ill-timed jest with my defender, soon had an opportunity to manifest itself more definitely; and I had the pleasure of showing Monsieur Marathon as much boldness as I had at first let him see depression.

The clerk came to tell us that the magistrate and his officers had gone to the Morgue and were waiting for us to go through the usual form of confronting the body of the victim.

Maître Croulebarbe said kindly:

"You don't feel too weak? At the mercy of emotion? It is always an unpleasant experience, is it not?"

I smiled at my attorney.

"Have at least as much confidence as I! To see your lack of faith in the justice of my cause, people might end by believing that you are the criminal!"

"Come, then," he answered pleasantly. "I see that I have to deal with a very strong man!"

Two gendarmes, naturally surly, put on handcuffs—a very useless precaution—to take me to the carriage which was waiting for us in front of the jail. About fifty loungers surrounded the vehicle, and I saw clearly, by the exasperation of these people who shook their fists at me, that I did not possess the sympathy of the public, which had been painfully stirred by the drama that had convulsed the peaceful little city! I tried to make head against the popular scorn, but I don't know whether I could have appeared very courageous or sufficiently imposing with the bandages which held my dressing around my forehead, and must have given me a vague resemblance to Robert Macaire caught in a trap!

At the Morgue, Monsieur Marathon and the prosecuting attorney were waiting for us, as the

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clerk had stated. The rosy and rotund magistrate could not stay in the same place. One might have taken him for one of the Dutch tops, flung by a child's hand, which goes bobbing from right to left, knocking against every obstacle. He came up to me, brisk and smiling.

"Well, have you reflected since this morning, my fine fellow?"

"I have reflected," I replied with a touch of haughtiness, "upon the misapprehension to which I owe the honour, if I may say so, of your accusation, and I confess that, in your place, any magistrate would have done the same."

This certificate of partial acuteness, instead of softening the judge, vexed him.

"Oh, ho!" he exclaimed. "If you take this tone, you will gain little of our sympathy!"

"I have not sought it!" I answered.

We passed into the hall where, on the slab, was exhibited the body of one of the van Brymans brothers, found murdered before the door of Pauline Mutel, my divorced wife.

His closed eyes, his set face, his compressed lips, gave the scene an atmosphere of suffering.

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I gazed at the body of the unfortunate man—placed approximately in the position in which he had been found on the pavement that morning. The collar of his shirt came up above the chin; the right leg of his trousers was stained. By his side lay his empty belt, a plaid handkerchief—his nickel watch—everything which could identify the body of Franz van Brymans, fish-dealer. For as to the rest, it was impossible by the unmarked and precisely similar clothing, the face exactly like his brother Otto's, to affirm, at first sight, whether it was the one or the other.

Prosecuting attorney, judge, lawyer, watched, with an attention that did not escape my notice, the expression of my face; but they could see nothing of my secret feelings, or at least could draw no fresh annoying deduction. My calmness was equal to theirs. Monsieur Marathon verified it himself by exaggerating, as usual: he called my composure cynicism.

The prosecuting attorney had placed in a glass case the convincing proof, which was the weapon used to commit the murder. He passed

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it to the magistrate, who gave it to me in the hollow of his hand.

"You recognise this, eh?"

I took the blade, not fully cleansed from the blood of the unfortunate victim. I turned it over, examined the medal and its inscription, and answered coldly.

"Yes, this is evidently the sailor Shoepen's knife. It is the very knife which Franz van Brymans snatched from his comrade's hands yesterday evening, and quietly put into his pocket, to avoid the fight which was on the point of breaking out between us and the Danish sailors."

My statement produced an extremely strong effect upon my counsel. His eyes sparkled behind his glasses, and he wished me to express my declaration, which he had already associated with my recent jest, in a more exact manner. But I remained silent and calm, as calm as the magistrate and prosecuting attorney, who doubtless needed a more formal declaration to be excited and attach any importance to my words.

"That is not the question," said Monsieur

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Marathon indifferently, and pointing to the corpse stretched before us :

“ The question is this : Prisoner, do you recognise your victim ? ”

“ Why do you persist in paying no attention to my protest, Judge ? I swear to you, once more, that I am innocent of the crime of which you accuse me ! Would it not be more logical and more simple—for then I could answer you—to ask me if I recognise the body of Franz van Brymans, the fish-dealer ? ”

“ It would only lack,” sneered the old codger, “ that you should not recognise him, and should put yourself in contradiction to your ex-wife, Pauline Mutel, who, be it said without irony, must have more reasons than you on which to base her conviction—to Pauline Mutel and to all the persons who daily associated with the fish-dealer, and have also recognised him ! ”

“ I have nothing to do with the opinions of other people,” I said, “ and when you wish to ask mine in an acceptable form——”

“ Ho ! ho ! ” laughed Monsieur Marathon heartily. “ You are sensitive and take the mat-

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ter haughtily!—I will be a good-natured judge, for once, and will put the question to you in this courteous form: ‘Do you recognise the body of Franz van Brymans, fish-dealer?’ ”

I advanced a step toward the corpse.

“Permit me,” I said.

“Go on,” said the thoughtless magistrate in a manner which, under any other circumstances, would have been comical.

I took the right arm of the dead man, which was pressed close to his body, and raised it. Then I looked at his right hand.

From the right hand of the murdered man the little finger was missing, cut clean off at the first joint, following the metacarpus, and this formed a sanguinolent swelling.

And it was my turn to enquire:

“What does this mean?”

“It means simply that the assassin, for a reason which we do not yet know, attacked his victim, and amputated his finger, of course!”

“This reason which you do not know, I can tell you, Judge!” I replied with a little air of superiority.

"We do not doubt it!" retorted the prosecuting attorney sarcastically.

My retaliation for so misplaced an irony was easy: I seized it.

"I know very well that you question nothing, monsieur. It is not the same with your somewhat sceptical servant, who declares it to be a material impossibility to recognise the body of Franz, the fish-dealer."

"Do you say so?" cried Monsieur Marathon in amazement, crimson with anger, rising from his seat like a flurried Jack-in-the-Box.

"I say," I continued quietly, "that Otto, from his early youth, had worn a silver ring on his little finger to distinguish himself distinctly from his brother Franz, and that after long use, the skin made a cushion around the narrow circlet. . . . I say that in the absence of this one characteristic sign according to the statement of every one, themselves included, neither you nor I, nor my wife Pauline Mutel, nor the friends and acquaintances of the twin brothers, nor even the wife of Otto, *née* Pauline Steurs, whose deposition you will receive this

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afternoon, can declare to you on their soul and conscience, that this body is Franz rather than Otto, or Otto rather than Franz!"

The prosecuting attorney glanced at the magistrate, the magistrate at the prosecuting attorney. They both looked astonished, the first touch of uncertainty which I had placed in the foundation of their precipitate reasoning.

But Monsieur Marathon was not a man to allow himself to be taken off his guard long, and he replied, in a tone of furious rage:

"By Jove! If you want to play sharp, my fine fellow, and this is the alibi you have invented to get yourself out of the business, we shall not take the trouble to confound you!"

The affectation made me smile.

"It is not an alibi that I am inventing, and it is not to play sharp, I assure you," I protested, "that I deny, from this moment, all authority to bring to a correct end an investigation of which one of the vanished van Brymans brothers—Otto or Franz, you know nothing about it—holds all the clues in his hand."

XIII

MY ACCOMPLICE

MONSIEUR MARATHON used some unfortunate words.

He employed one that was especially painful when he informed me at once that, from the Morgue, we were going to the Palais de Justice, where, in his private office, he intended to confront me, without farther delay, with the woman whom he pompously called "my accomplice."

"Now," he said, "we are going to pass to another kind of exercises."

This was the manner in which this benevolent magistrate mingled humour and severity.

The horror of the circumstances removed from this meeting between Pauline Mutel and myself the constraint which we should have felt—the evening before, for instance, in finding ourselves face to face. I do not know whether,

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on her side, she could have been led to believe in my guilt but, on mine, I was certain of her perfect innocence.

When I found myself in the presence of Pauline Mutel a very sweet emotion took possession of me. It was, by antithesis, the secret pleasure of again finding a face I knew, among all the hostile countenances which surrounded me; and I saw by her momentary agitation, her gentle glance, imploring I knew not what pity from me, that her mind, if not her heart, was drawing near to me, and that her recent misfortune was seeking, in my greater one, a goodwill which she deserved, besides a comfort which I could not refuse her.

More and better than all the rest our mutual misfortune was uniting us again. I felt it in the inmost depths of my being, and I thought I perceived in her softened gaze that the same impression was making her tremble with emotion. But it is certain that Monsieur Marathon beheld exactly the contrary in the exchange of our glances, for he instantly said jocosely:

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"This is no reason for you to look at each other like china dogs!"

And this remark gave me the opportunity to state:

"I have no cause to impute the slightest blame to my divorced wife, and I am the first to pity, with all my kindly sympathy, the unpleasant situation in which you have so unreasonably placed her!"

"I beg you to keep your comments to yourself," said the judge sternly.

Pauline Mutel had given me a look of gratitude, and this was all I desired: to let her know my commiseration.

Her examination began.

I will not dwell upon the unpleasant character for her, taken by the stupid questions of the magistrate. It may be supposed that he did not spare emphasising in a very coarse fashion the well-known connection between the fish-dealer and this poor woman, and to stigmatise her conduct with the commonplaces of current morality.

She held her own, as best she could, against this avalanche of nonsense; and I admired her

courage in defending the personal independence, which the law, after all, had granted her.

But the interesting point in her statement was that she might have foreseen, if not actually known of the impending drama.

She stated that she had anticipated nothing of the whole affair! For a fortnight she had noticed an extreme uneasiness on the part of Franz, but she had not been able to divine the reason. During the last two weeks, Franz, her lover, had asked her a number of questions about Maxime Aubry, her former husband, but he had not opened his lips concerning my stay at Biville-sur-Mer. And this explained the deep emotion, the sudden agitation, which she had felt on seeing me, the afternoon of the day before, appear in the Place Moulin-à-Vent, before her door, in the company of Otto, whom she was excusable for having mistaken for Franz!

She had expected Franz all the evening to make an explanation, and Franz had not come! She had spent a night of agony, vainly trying to comprehend under what conditions I chanced to be in relations with the fish-dealer, her lover!

And in the morning the neighbours had waked her to inform her of the enigmatical and tragical occurrence.

At this part of her narrative, she covered her face with both hands and burst into sobs. Her weak woman's nerves had given away. But Monsieur Marathon's were stronger, for he turned to me and asked:

"Then you, too, are probably going to tell us the same nonsense?"

"If Otto van Brymans were here to bear witness," I replied, "he would tell you that chance conducted us yesterday afternoon to the Place Moulin-à-Vent! And I give you my word that chance alone apprised me yesterday that Franz's sweetheart was Pauline Mutel!"

"And during the three years that you have been divorced, you are going to swear, into the bargain, I suppose, that this is the first time you have been together?"

"It is as you say!"

He threw himself back in his chair, and his rotund figure shook with a burst of laughter.

"Oh! young man! young man! you certainly

are not so clever as you would like to appear."

And to confound me, as he had boasted at the Morgue he would do, the judge drew from his writing case the pencil portrait which I had sketched at Biville—the portrait of Pauline Mutel—the portrait which was so good a likeness, though executed off-hand—the portrait which had made Franz turn pale the evening he had had me entered in the travellers' register.

"And this!" he said. "What is this?"

"It is the portrait of Pauline Mutel, one of the best drawings I have ever made—and I should be grateful if you would not damage it by unskilful handling."

His eyes darted lightnings at me. I apologised:

"Merely an artist's solicitude!"

"Ah! I know them, these artists!—ever since I cleared up the case of the mime Properce, by the Powers!"

And he persisted:

"And this?—And this?"

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He pressed his big finger like a spatula upon my signature, followed by the date: *October, 1907.*

I understood the old fellow's error, and smiled pityingly at his blunder.

"Oh! indeed!" he said. "That makes you laugh! You have the nerve for it!"

Then, putting the sheet before the eyes of Pauline Mutel, he said smiling, somewhat amused by his over easy victory:

"Is it too much to ask you, Madame, to remember that you have posed for your artist husband, in the course of the present month of October, 1907?"

Pauline Mutel had taken her portrait from the hands of the magistrate. She was admiring it. I saw her tearful eyes kindle with a fleeting joy. I saw her soft red lips half part as if to breath a sigh of relief. She looked at me, this time, with an expression of extreme gratitude. She was flushed with happiness. And she gave the paper back to the magistrate, without even deigning to answer his question, which in her delight she had doubtless forgotten.

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I answered for her, saying sarcastically to the judge:

"You are giving Madame a cause for pride which she perhaps no longer possessed! You will persuade her that she still occupies in my heart a place which neither time nor separation has had power to diminish—since I have maintained for three years in my mind an image so persistent that its evocation sufficed to reconstitute it—and in so truthful a manner that you yourself, a perspicacious man by profession, are dazzled by it."

Monsieur Marathon, vexed by his failure, turned toward the prosecuting attorney, and holding his hand before his mouth whispered, but not low enough to keep every one from hearing:

"We have done enough for this morning! I'll make you an appetiser!"

XIV

WHAT AWAITED US IN THE RUE TÊTE-DE-BŒUF

THE prosecuting attorney had not the frankness of the examining magistrate. He must have had a horror of appetisers, for, after consulting his watch, he replied:

"We still have a good hour before luncheon, and perhaps it might be more useful to employ it in pushing the investigation severely."

"Employ it in what?" questioned Monsieur Marathon, who thought he had done work enough since five o'clock that morning, in arresting an artist who had been knocked senseless, and a poor quiet woman.

"But," said the prosecuting attorney more definitely, "might not a visit from the officers of the law prove profitable in the furnished lodgings in the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf, where the prisoner stated that he had sent his baggage three weeks ago, but had not yet occupied?"

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"Certainly!" Monsieur Marathon assented, still thinking of the famous portrait seized at the tavern of *The Thieving Magpie*. "Perhaps we shall find still more interesting things there!"

And, turning to me, he added:

"It is very certain that you have never lived in the rooms rented by Mère Hurteaux?"

"It is certain."

"That is strange, in any case—to hire a furnished room one does not need! But we shall see."

My counsel had leaned over my shoulder with affected solicitude, and whispered in my ear:

"You have nothing valuable, nothing excessively important for the defence to confide to me?"

I moved my head from right to left.

"Nothing to fear," he persisted, "from these new investigations?"

"Nothing, I assure you!" I answered, half turning toward him.

And I laughed in his very face.

"However, calm yourself, my dear Maître Croulebarbe, and be content with the silent part of cautious observer which you fill with so much discretion. Try to understand that, in spite of appearances, I am the sole master of the situation!"

At this paradoxical assertion, which must have seemed to him prodigiously optimistic, he started aside so suddenly that his eyeglasses dropped from his nose.

In truth, the first bewilderment and terror which had followed the monstrous accusation of which I was the object had now given place to perfect calmness. I was completely reassured concerning my fate and was ending by amusing myself with the somewhat summary proceedings of a blind justice which, in its erroneous deductions, with comical persistence, was taking the moon for green cheese.

Nevertheless, as we never know just how far the imagination may go of the people who possess the formidable privilege of judging their peers, I kept on my guard and showed my irreverence only just to the point that was neces-

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sary to pay off Monsieur Marathon, without drawing down his thunderbolts. He had a right to indulge in all sorts of jests, and that is wherein I recognised, up to the present time, his superiority.

As every one rose with a noise of moving chairs, and the judge gave the order to take "my accomplice" back to jail, I gave Pauline Mutel a last glance of compassion, whose full affectionate sympathy she understood, for she returned it with an expression of startled tenderness in her eyes which I had never before seen, even in the early days of our marriage.

The gendarmes who guarded me complacently put on the accursed handcuffs to take me to the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf with my anxious counsel, who would not let me stir a foot away, through fear of complications.

I again saw, on the trip we made, how little sympathy I had from the public. Opinion must follow in the train of the judge's presumptions. Why the deuce should I have any grudge against public opinion, since now I no longer bore any even against the man who had created it? As

usually happens, with regard to opinion, I was *a priori* the culprit, since I was the prisoner! And I stoically endured the vindictive attitude of the crowd.

Monsieur Marathon and the prosecuting attorney had preceded us but a very short time to the lodging house of Mère Hurteaux, who, as I had foreseen, did not show me the same warmth of welcome which she had given me the day before. In the first place, all this paraphernalia of justice terrified her, on account of the bad reputation that she fancied it might bring upon her respectable house! And then I was a murderer, people said, and I saw the horror with which I inspired her.

We were a little crowded in the small room where she received us. She brought in chairs. The two gendarmes had to stay in the entry, and Monsieur Marathon asked her several questions, to which she replied swiftly, with a volubility that showed her haste to get through with the matter and see us outside.

She brought out the letter from Mère Vincent, the cousin in Tréport, which was full of

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praises of me. She mentioned the uneasiness she had felt in not having me arrive sooner to settle in her house, an uneasiness which Franz, the fish-dealer, had come to quiet by paying her a month's rent in advance.

This startled Monsieur Marathon, who said indignantly:

"Well! It's fine business to have his rent paid by his wife's lover!"

The prosecuting attorney did not take this exaggeration seriously.

"So," he said to the woman, "you had never seen your lodger?"

"I saw the gentleman for the first time yesterday," replied Mère Hurteaux, "when he came about three o'clock in the afternoon, to look at the room I had kept for him, in the company of a sailor who must have been on an English ship."

At these words the judge and the prosecuting attorney looked at each other. Immense satisfaction was expressed in their features. And Monsieur Marathon, flushed with surprise, stammered:

"With the sailor Shoepen? Really, he came here with the sailor Shoepen,—the man with the knife—really and truly?"

"What interest do you suppose that this woman would have in lying?" said I.

"And you confess it?"

"Ah!" I replied, "my own interest can lie only in having the truth told, whatever it may be."

But the magistrate, in great delight, was rubbing his hands and congratulating himself.

"This is a great step, *de facto*, for the investigation."

And he asked for the keys of my room in order, as he said, to make an interesting little incursion into it.

To which the landlady answered that she had given me the keys the evening before, which I admitted immediately, while apologising for having lost them during the evening.

Monsieur Marathon saw something very serious in this unlucky fact. He did not know

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exactly what it was, but he undoubtedly thought himself gifted with a sense of divination, for he ordered:

“Send for a locksmith! We are surely going to discover some fine things!”

And, while one of the gendarmes went to look for some workman in the neighbourhood, Monsieur Marathon began to rub his hands joyfully again, murmuring:

“Ah! ah! ah! . . . You came here into the room paid for by your victim . . . entirely alone with the sailor Shoepen . . . the sailor with the accusing knife—and you knowingly lost the keys of your lodgings a short time before the crime! Well, you are cool, my fine fellow!”

His sneer sent a shiver through Maître Croulebarbe, my counsel, who was more and more troubled by the turn events were taking, and the prosecuting attorney, who was plunged in difficult reflections. I alone maintained an appearance of calmness.

Monsieur Marathon again asked the landlady:

"And you are certain that they did not come back last night?"

"I could not tell you that. The room is outside of the house, entirely independent."

"Did the prisoner choose it so?"

"No, but he seemed extremely pleased with it yesterday."

"All this is not very clear!" commented the worthy judge.

And, as the locksmith was brought with his bunch of keys, it was decided that we should go to see what we were going to see—to use, once more, the divinatory expressions of the excellent Monsieur Marathon.

We rose to go out into the street, in order to reach the little independent building which had pleased me so much at first sight, the evening before. My counsel had a horribly uneasy manner, as if he feared this trivial formality on my account.

The locksmith had some trouble in picking the lock, which was an old-fashioned pattern.

"Yet I thought I turned the key only once," I said.

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"This man is mistaken," replied the locksmith, "for not only has it been locked twice, but again in several directions, as if by a person in a great hurry, so that it is broken."

At last, after ten minutes' waiting, the door of the room was opened.

The judge went in first.

But he had no sooner taken two steps within the chamber than he turned, greatly agitated, toward the prosecuting attorney.

The prosecuting attorney, who preceded me, turned toward me, pale and awful.

The gendarmes themselves, people accustomed to all sorts of business, could not restrain a twofold cry of bewilderment and horror.

Within the room, among trunks broken open, on the bed, on my bed, the body of the sailor Shoepen, strangled by the aid of his woollen comforter, lay stretched upon his back, his face swollen, his eyes starting from their sockets, a spectacle to strike with terror any man less master of himself than I was now, whatever might happen in future!

XV

MONSIEUR MARATHON'S ROMANCE

I MUST say, to my shame, that I had a very good appetite for my luncheon. Thanks to the kindness of Monsieur Marathon, who multiplied his attentions in the hope of bringing me to make full confession, I had been allowed to order from the outside a meal which, though simple, was all the same superior to the prison fare.

In comparing my calmness of mind with the general disorder prevailing in my room in the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf, my counsel could make nothing of it. I knew that I must appear, in the eyes of all, to be endowed with a revolting cynicism. My character of assassin was becoming more and more convincing. My relative tranquillity doubtless rested on the fact that I did not regard this new murder—of the sailor—from the same angle as my accusers. Since

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eight o'clock in the morning, the hour that I awoke in the hospital between an attentive Sister of Charity and an unsympathetic physician, facts had developed with a disconcerting rapidity which simply blunted my sensibility.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon, and already I had been confronted with the corpse of one of the van Brymans brothers, stabbed with Shoepen's knife, and with the dead body of this same Shoepen found upon my bed in the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf!

These were, according to all the evidence, two connected crimes, with which the attack upon myself must be associated. The examining magistrate united them incorrectly, that was all! The slight character of my wound made it appear suspicious, though it was not doubtful to the hospital surgeon that I had escaped death by chance—since the blow which had been dealt would have been mortal two centimeters lower.

But Justice considered only the result; and the result was that it had in its grasp, at pres-

ent, two dead men and one living, and that it was logical to hold the living man guilty of the death of the two others.

The doctor came to the prison about three o'clock, to examine my wound and renew the dressing. He had a scornful expression on his face as he said:

"Pooh! it's very trivial and, after this evening, you can expose the wound to the free air, to allow it to close more quickly."

"To the free air?" I replied, smiling. "I would like to do so, but I have no very great hope of it."

Afterwards I received a visit from Maître Croulebarbe. He looked less depressed than he had done before luncheon, at the time of the ominous and crushing discovery in the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf. He addressed me with almost an air of sprightliness.

"I am beginning to regain hope," he said. "You are going to have in your game a trump upon which I did not reckon."

"The deposition of Otto van Brymans' wife," I ventured.

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"Yes. She has just been brought into the presence of the corpse of the man who was stabbed, and she refuses to recognise it for that of Franz—the fish-dealer!"

"I had foreseen it!"

"But what you probably did not foresee is that she formally identified it as that of Otto, her husband; poor woman!"

I reflected an instant.

"On what does she base it?" I asked.

"On the amputation of the little finger, which is the demonstration of this fact: that the assassin or assassins wished to effect the disappearance of the only possible proof of identity!"

I again reflected:

"In that case, she was wrong to affirm that it was Otto."

"Why—wrong?"

"Because"—I hesitated—"we are only in the first day of the investigation."

"I don't understand!"

"I will suppose that to-morrow a—a third corpse is found."

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My sensitive counsel visibly turned pale. I waited some little time before adding:

"And that this corpse of the second of the van Brymans brothers should also have the little finger amputated. . . ."

"Unfortunate man!" cried my counsel.—
"Why, this horrible supposition would definitely crush you!"

"That is true," I said, trying to smile, "for then the investigation, finding itself in the presence of three dead bodies and one living man, it would be indisputably demonstrated that the survivor, alone, had killed the three others."

Maître Croulebarbe trembled at this last supposition: he was a gentle, timid man, no better suited to his profession than I to the character of assassin.

He availed himself of a diversion:

"But you have another trump, valuable in a different way, in your game."

"Another!" I cried in astonishment.

"Yes. The prosecuting attorney is no longer so sure of your guilt as he was before! If the murder of the sailor Shoepen strengthens the

belief of the judge, it shakes the prosecuting attorney's! But I ought to warn you that the prosecuting attorney's opinion is on a matter of feeling, and that Monsieur Marathon is the sole master of the investigation."

In spite of this limitation, I could not help blessing, from the bottom of my heart, the prosecuting attorney, who was beginning to be interested in me. I insisted upon knowing on what he laid stress to formulate his first doubt.

"On nothing!" replied Maître Croulebarbe ingenuously. "He says that the proofs brought against you are too—too precise—too logical—too demonstrative—if you prefer—not to have been—prepared, in a plan which is not yet known, by some interested person, over-eager to prove your guilt. Thus in admitting, with Monsieur Marathon, that you have played a part in the new Shoeppen affair, he finds it—too evident! And he has offered this statement, which is certainly original, that it was no longer the court which would demonstrate your guilt, but you who would demonstrate it to the court. And from this reasoning,—between ourselves

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somewhat rose-coloured,—he sets out to reserve the right of a positive estimate!”

I uttered a sigh of relief:

“At last we have an intelligent fellow!”

Maître Croulebarbe did not seem to take offence at this praise which did not affect him, and said:

“We are going back to the court where, to close a day so well filled, you are to see Otto van Brymans’ wife, *née* Pauline Steurs. . . . I must tell you that the judge received by telegraph this morning information concerning you and Pauline Mutel, your divorced wife—but I don’t think that it was unfavourable to you!”

“In short, I am to undergo an examination in due form?”

“As you choose to take it! It’s mainly Monsieur Marathon’s affair! He is waiting to have in his hands all the portions of the case! I think he will confine himself to making, before you and all the others, a clear and plain statement of the situation.”

“A little romance, eh!” I insinuated.

"Oh!" replied Maître Croulebarbe. "He has a pretty fair relish for intrigue, if he wanted to take the trouble to enter into it."

The jailer came to tell us that the carriage was there, and my counsel apologised for the four mounted gendarmes who, this time, guarded the vehicle.

"It is again a precaution of Monsieur Marathon! The populace is so excited, since the discovery of the new crime, that it is prudent to take special measures to protect you!"

And Monsieur Marathon's precaution made me smile.

I was in haste to see Pauline Steurs, to find myself face to face with the poor woman, whose distraction and anguish I imagined. And I was relying, also, upon finding in her attitude an unconscious help in my situation.

My expectations had not deceived me. When I entered the magistrate's office Otto's wife, in tears, overwhelmed by the frightful tragedy, was seated at the right of the room whose other end was occupied by Pauline Mutel, my wife! Monsieur Marathon was flanked by the prose-

cutting attorney and the clerk. I took my place opposite to them.

Then, in an outburst of pity, Otto van Brymans' wife could not help calling to me:

"Oh, Monsieur Aubry, it was no use that I told the judge you were innocent!"

A loud, resounding blow of the ruler upon the desk reminded her of the solemnity of the place; and Monsieur Marathon, the man who went by rule, fiercely reproved her:

"It is not your place to speak, and I request you to be silent."

My heart leaped with sincere gratitude to this poor creature who, in the midst of her own terrible affliction, still found means to give an expression of her trust in me. And I said to her with all my heart:

"I thank you!"

Monsieur Marathon, thoroughly enraged with me, cried:

"One word more from you—and I'll have you taken back where you came from!"

The delightful emotion which had stirred the inmost fibres of my being at the words of

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Pauline Steurs, gave place, at these words, to the feeling of mockery I entertained toward the judge, and I continued:

“Consider yourself fortunate, Madame, that you are not accused of complicity, like Pauline Mutel, my divorced wife here—the sweetheart, you know—to whom Franz promised marriage!”

My counsel pulled me smartly by the sleeve, and whispered:

“Things will go badly with you, if you keep on!”

The clerk interfered, shouting: “Silence!”

And Monsieur Marathon, having borrowed from the austere setting of this scene a majesty which he did not naturally possess, stated with emphasis while rummaging among his papers, vague points in the data of his harangue.

“Listen, prisoner, to the brief explanation of the charges which rest upon you. We have tried to establish, with impartiality, the causes of the double murder which engages our attention. Our task is rendered sufficiently difficult by the obstinacy with which you persist in not giving

evidence; but by uniting to one another the various depositions concerning you, that of your wife, Pauline Mutel, that of the witness here present, and that of your landlady, Mère Hurteaux, we shall arrive, by a series of probable hypotheses, in reconstituting as far as can be done, the genesis of this perplexing affair."

Then suddenly, no longer occupying himself with me, and addressing himself to the company—that is, to the clerk and the attentive lawyers—he began his imaginary explanation in these words:

"The prisoner, Monsieur Aubry, is what may be called an artist, in the evil acceptation of the term! His antecedents are no more dreadful than those of anybody else!

"He is divorced from his wife, who comes to live in our city. Without being a person of bad reputation, this woman is not long in making the acquaintance of Franz van Brymans, the victim, who lived with his brother, the landlord of *The Thieving Magpie*, in the little village of Biville-sur-Mer. Up to this

point there is nothing which is not perfectly natural! But we have no occasion to go back to the flood to follow the affair in its known details.

"We find Monsieur Aubry, toward the end of September, installed at Tréport, in order to practise his art and, without motive—he himself says so—having his baggage sent to the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf. Why did the prisoner choose Dieppe as the goal of his excursion, and not any other port along the coast? He will tell you again himself—chance! And that it is still chance which makes him stop on the way precisely at *The Thieving Magpie*, and not at any other tavern on the Eu road, no one can doubt!

"An ordinary man, a man like you and me, would have pursued his way the next morning, and travelled the twenty kilometers he still had to go to reach the end of his journey. This is simple common sense! But the prisoner is in perpetual contradiction to common sense! He remains three weeks—three weeks, you clearly understand,—at the van Brymans brothers'

tavern! Decidedly, chance is a dangerous accomplice in this affair!

“The prisoner will tell you that he did not know that Franz was his wife’s lover! He will tell you also that he had no thought of his wife—and that he was even ignorant that she lived in Dieppe. And this is contradicted, immediately, by the telltale portrait of which you know—so striking in its resemblance,—which he executed, he asserts, under the influence of an obsession! And this is also contradicted by the deposition of his landlord’s wife, Pauline Steurs, who remembers having spoken to him of Franz’s well-known connection, a short time after his arrival!

“Did Franz van Brymans know that the artist was his sweetheart’s former husband? Here we are reduced to the most delicate hypotheses. We must again refer to the deposition of Otto van Brymans’ wife, who declares that Franz was continually constrained by Maxime Aubry’s presence in the tavern, and that, moreover, the artist scarcely concealed an antipathy to the fish-dealer!

"In any case, it is certain that Franz van Brymans, the victim, knew at least several days before the crime, the real identity of the prisoner, since it was he who compelled him to write his name in the travellers' register!

"And it is starting from this moment that Monsieur Aubry hastens the movements of events with a precision which leads us to believe that the crime had been planned a long while, and arranged with his ex-wife, Pauline Mutel, though up to this point we have found no trace of intercourse between them.

"I am well aware that Otto van Brymans' wife states that the prisoner never left the tavern during his stay! This might be, at first sight, an argument in favour of Pauline Mutel! However, it is an argument which will turn against the prisoner, if we ask ourselves for what reasons a man who did not have the curiosity to visit our beautiful city, during the twenty days after his baggage reached there, suddenly had the untimely desire!

"Reason? The prisoner will answer, 'I had none!' It certainly was not to see the sailor

Shoepen, whom he did not know, that he went to Dieppe! Granted! But he would jump at the opportunity offered! He would take time by the forelock, if I may say so, to accompany his wife's lover and his brother on a pleasure trip, in which pleasure was not his principal object! The prisoner believes he can get out of it, as usual, by again invoking the complicity of chance!

"It is upon chance that he has built up the whole scaffolding of his system of defence! Unfortunately for him we, the examining magistrate, cannot attack an accomplice so intangible! Chance is not to be arrested at a street corner, as we arrest Maxime Aubry, the divorced husband of the victim's sweetheart!"

And to regain his breath, and enjoy the effect of his witticism, Monsieur Marathon made a good-natured gesture accompanied by a burst of laughter.

Then, having taken breath, he went on:

"Now we have the van Brymans brothers and Monsieur Aubry in the streets of our city,

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in company with the sailor Shoepen! What happens then?

"We have—and it is vexatious—only the evidently untruthful declaration of the prisoner himself upon which to form an opinion. But, such as it is, it leaves the field open for sufficiently good deductions! The prisoner has not thought of everything. He has not thought that, by showing himself in broad daylight in the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf, with the sailor, he was going to forge with his own hands the most formidable weapon of the accusation.

"Here we must turn to Pauline Mutel, and extract from her deposition a point in the story which leaves the door open to two suppositions. Was the sailor Shoepen, in this tragedy, a secondary victim craftily chosen by Aubry to lead astray the suspicions of justice? Or, has he been an accomplice in this tragedy who was afterwards put out of the way, while still pursuing the same goal?

"The Mutel woman has stated that the evening before the drama, her lover Franz came to see her, in the company of the sailor, and

told her that he could not visit her the next day, because he should be with his brother Otto and some one else—and that the two brothers were overjoyed to meet again a friend of their childhood, the man whom he introduced to her.

“Let us admit, for an instant, the truth of this statement. We will refuse to believe in the complicity of this childhood friend, who had been disembarked only a few days in our port, not having seen the van Brymans brothers for ten years, and not knowing from Adam and Eve the Aubry couple! . . . And we lean positively to the first hypothesis . . . and understand all the advantage which the prisoner might draw from such a meeting!

“Having said this, let us see the use he makes of it. Contrary to his principles and habits—it is once more he himself who admits it!—the prisoner, in company with the three men, rambles all the evening from tavern to tavern, to end in a sailors’ wine-shop, where a quarrel breaks out between the Danish mariners and Shoepen. Oh! the stage-setting is well calculated for the effect to be produced—later!

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“Shoepen, according to the witnesses whom we have heard, is in such a state of intoxication that he draws his knife and shows it ostentatiously to his opponent—the very knife which we shall find the next day plunged into Franz’s breast! It would be easy for a man who was almost the only one to keep sober, like Monsieur Aubry, according to the witnesses of this fight, to get possession of Shoepen’s knife when once outside! It was easy for the man who had matured so terrible a design to execute it without fear! He had, to aid him, the blind confidence of the van Brymans brothers, whose guest he was—their confidence and—their intoxication!

“The night, he thought, was propitious to the execution of a plotted crime! He went for the first time to the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf in the company of Shoepen. He knew the arrangement of the room. He knew that at that hour of the night no one would disturb him! He showed in the afternoon an impolitic gratification at being lodged outside of the main house of Mère Hurteaux. Shoepen, dead drunk,

without defence, was at his mercy. He strangled him in order to put people on the wrong track and, getting possession of the denunciatory weapon, he went quietly back to the stable, where occurred the principal drama, concerning which we can surmise nothing accurately without the confession of the assassin, and which may be summed up in three points: first, the certain murder of Franz van Brymans, identified by Pauline Mutel; second, the feigned attack upon the prisoner; third, the enigmatical disappearance of the landlord of *The Thieving Magpie!*"

And Monsieur Marathon punctuated with three heavy blows of his fist upon the waxed oak of his desk the enunciation, in the order of their importance, of the three mysteries which remained to be explained, and upon which he had believed he was throwing some light by his improbable romance.

XVI

TO FOLLOW THE PRECEDENT

WITH a rapid glance I estimated the influence of the romance upon the women. Evidently neither Pauline Mutel, who had recognised Franz, nor Pauline Steurs, who had identified Otto in the body exhibited in the Morgue, believed that I could be the assassin, the one of her lover, or the other of her husband.

But the easy deduction concerning the mysterious murder of the sailor Shoepen had agitated them, in spite of its improbability; nay, perhaps, even on account of its improbability.

I could not repress a gesture of irritation, which was quickly noticed by the prosecuting attorney, a more observing man than the others, for he asked me this natural, yet foolish question:

“What do you say to it?”

“I say,” I replied, opportunely remembering

Monsieur Marathon's words that morning in the hospital, "that it is sufficiently ingenious—though puerile and utterly childish—and, if the judge would permit me to use his argument, I would undertake to show him that all the conjectures he has accumulated with regard to me can be attributed with more precision to another person."

"To what other?" roared Monsieur Marathon.

"The person whom you may please to point out to me, your Honour."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the old fellow. "I should really like to see that! You are capable of showing me that the sailor Shoepen strangled himself?"

"As clearly as you have proved to me that I was struck down and brought within an ace of death for my own pleasure!"

"Or that it was Franz, the murdered man, who was his own assassin?"

"That far more clearly than all the rest!"

The judge burst into a tremendous shout of

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laughter and, turning to the prosecuting attorney, said:

"Ought he to be allowed to speak? Do you think the majesty of the law would suffer from it?"

"Not at all!" replied the prosecuting attorney, "and the prisoner, without his own knowledge, may be of great assistance to us!"

"Very well!" said the judge benevolently, "You shall see how easy-going we are. We will permit you to talk the time away with your nonsense for fifteen minutes—but don't take advantage of it."

"I will take so little advantage of it," I answered, bowing, "that I shall content myself with controverting the terrifying little story which you have just related. I shall leave no place to the imagination. I shall be merely your plagiarist. I shall devote myself to transposing your process of deduction, without either omitting anything from it, or adding one iota. I shall put myself, for ten minutes, in your skin, with all due deference to the respect which I owe you. It will not be I who will speak; it

will be another examining magistrate, gifted with the same perspicacity, but exercising it in the opposite direction. And, in order that my reasoning may be no more deficient in foundation than yours, I will prop it from the beginning upon your argument, turned the other way."

"I don't understand!" cried Monsieur Marathon, in bewilderment.

"Let us see!" I replied. "You start from this point of departure: the secret motive making the husband act against his wife's lover?"

"Certainly."

"I myself shall start from this other: the secret motive making the lover act against the husband of his sweetheart! And this is just exactly as logical, neither more nor less."

"Well, start! But start quickly," growled the judge, scratching his head and letting the dandruff fall upon his papers.

"The victim here present," I began, in an indifferent tone, "is what may be called an artist in every acceptation of the term. We find him installed at Tréport, toward the end of

September, entirely absorbed by his art and roving in his reveries from beach to beach, when chance brings him to Biville-sur-Mer, and the tavern of *The Thieving Magpie*. We know his antecedents, his divorce from Pauline Mutel—we know that Pauline was not a woman of bad reputation—that, to the knowledge of everybody, she was the sweetheart of Franz van Brymans, who had promised her marriage and, for causes of which we are ignorant, deceived the poor woman! For we are almost ignorant of Franz's antecedents, if we know those of Maxime Aubry. We are aware that he accompanied his brother Otto, the tavern-keeper, who is a married man and father of a family, when he came to settle in *The Thieving Magpie*—but that is all we know—or nearly all!

“Yes! We know, also, by the testimony of Otto van Brymans' wife, that Franz showed the chance customer who had stopped at the inn an animosity which it was impossible for him to conceal! Maxime Aubry having, according to his own confession, lost sight of his wife for more than two years, and Pauline Mutel, ac-

according to her statement, being absolutely ignorant of everything relating to her husband, it is evident that he is not aware in whose presence he stands when he confronts Franz, the fish-dealer!

"But is Franz himself likewise ignorant of the identity of the artist? We cannot be sure. But what we can affirm is that he learns it in a positive manner, several days before the crime, by making him put his name down in the travellers' register.

"And it is from this point that the drama enters upon its development with inconceivable rapidity.

"Franz knows what Maxime Aubry does not know—the arrangement of the room reserved by the landlady in the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf, for the future occupancy of the victim! Franz went several times to Mère Hurteaux's house; he paid a month's rent in advance on his own authority; he brought from there the artist's two valises—and at different times he dwelt upon the landlady's surprise at the non-arrival of her strange lodger!

“ It seems evident, at first sight, that he tried in vain to attract Maxime Aubry to Dieppe. Perhaps he might not have succeeded alone, if chance had not unexpectedly aided his design. And chance appears to us in the form of the sailor Shoepen, like the van Brymans brothers a native of Antwerp!

“ Otto van Brymans’ wife has given us the truthful account of all the particulars connected with her husband’s trip to the city—the opportunity which Franz, his brother, offered him to wear his new clothes, which was a means for making fun of their old comrade, on account of the famous resemblance between the twin brothers. She has confirmed Aubry’s hesitation about joining the party. To induce him to do so required the unanimity of a pressing invitation on the part of Otto, Franz, and herself.

“ Evidently we can leave a large share of the responsibility to chance, but the law cannot attack an accomplice so intangible! It is as difficult to arrest chance at a street corner as to arrest the van Brymans brother who has now disappeared, and whom all the hypotheses, so care-

fully examined and joined to one another, make us regard as the author of this terrible drama!"

And, in this part of my demonstration, I turned toward the prosecuting attorney and copied Monsieur Marathon's good-natured gesture. I even believe, may Heaven forgive me, that I imitated his foolish and irritating laugh.

Then, after a silence, I went on, still using with method his course of argument.

"Here, then, are the van Brymans brothers and their guest in the streets of our city, with the sailor Shoepen! What happens? Alas! each minute that passes will bring us a fresh presumption in favour of the accusation! Each hour of this long afternoon will be employed by the assassin in the deliberate planning of his odious crime!

"It is Franz van Brymans who will send the sailor Shoepen to take Aubry to the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf! It is Franz van Brymans who will find an excuse to spend the evening in Dieppe! Oh! the stage-setting is well calculated for the effect to be produced later! He does not have time to go to the Savings Bank to deposit the

relatively large sum he carries on his person! —It is easy for a man who has conceived so black a purpose to execute it without fear! He has in his favour the blind confidence of his brother Otto, the special condition of moral depression in which Aubry finds himself after the scene of the afternoon, in the Place Moulin-à-Vent, in front of Pauline Mutel's shop. The night, he thinks, is propitious for the execution of the crime. He has the sailor Shoepen's knife in one of his pockets, and in the other the key of the room in the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf, which the landlady could not find! Shoepen, dead-drunk, is defenceless, at his mercy. He makes the pretext of taking him back on board the *Arbalète*, to send Aubry and Otto to the stable on the Quay Henri IV. He strangles Shoepen to lead astray a less astute magistrate and, furnished with the denunciatory weapon, he quietly returns to the stable, where the principal drama occurs, a drama concerning which we can imagine nothing definitely so long as the supposed author is not arrested, but which may be summed up in three points: first, the certain

murder of Otto van Brymans, identified by his wife, *née* Pauline Steurs; second, the attack upon Maxime Aubry, left for dead on the spot; third, the disappearance of Franz, the fish-dealer, concerning whom we have only to wish his speedy arrest! ”

And my last sentence having fallen upon a troubled silence on the part of the entire assembly, I could again, with a single swift glance, estimate the influence of the romance, not only upon the women, but also the men.

Pauline Mutel, her lips half-parted, her breathing fairly suspended during my strange recital, was watching me with wild eyes. As for the woman who had been Pauline Steurs, she had grown ghastly pale while hearing me thus definitely specify all the suspicions which were probably sleeping in the depths of her consciousness.

As to the prosecuting attorney, he maintained his cold, forced impassiveness.

My story had certainly not agitated him, but I was sure, nevertheless, that it had interested him; which was by no means the case with Mon-

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sieur Marathon, for he instantly said, with the little careless air which was peculiar to him:

“Dear me! My friend—I congratulate you! You excel in parody. But, if it were necessary to follow you, you would lead us a long way. Besides, I am charitably going to point out to you where your story fails. Whoever wants to prove too much proves nothing! In my hypothesis, the murder of Shoepen, committed by you, is the unquestionable corollary of the murder of Franz. In yours, what sense is there in the murder of Otto by his brother?”

“That is exactly what I was going to ask you.”

“No, but—You are not a little cracked?”

“I was going to ask you,” I stated quietly, “if it was really necessary to rely upon a secret rivalry between me, the husband, and Franz, the lover, to decipher the clue of this horrible tragedy! I was going to beg you to consider whether the cause which you have invented, as well as the one which I devised to oppose it, were not equally out of relation to the effect—

that there is really a disproportion between cause and effect—and that perhaps it would be prudent not to attach any more importance to my romance than to yours!”

“Then you undertake to make a mock of justice?” cried the scandalised judge.

“Not at all! If you will allow me for the last time to use your own words, I will profit by it to enlighten you concerning the false path upon which you have entered—and in which I have followed through a spirit of imitation! You said, your Honour, in your lucid explanation of the affair, when desiring to speak of my antecedents, ‘We will not go back to the flood!’ Well, yes, exaggeration aside, it is necessary for you to go back to the flood! Search my life, and that of my wife! Search the private life of Franz van Brymans and that of his brother Otto! Try to discover the real motive for so monstrous a crime! Endeavour to consider me, as well as the sailor Shoepen, as unimportant partners and accessories of the drama whose threads you have to disentangle, and perhaps you will draw near the truth, from which your

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narrative and mine, both presumptive and openly imaginary, have withdrawn us."

"But," interposed the prosecuting attorney drily, with a precision which had a definite purpose, "to whom do you wish us to apply, if not to you?"

I had instinctively turned toward Pauline Steurs, Otto's unhappy wife.

But, before I could have articulated even the semblance of a reply, Pauline Steurs had risen to her feet, at the end of the office. Her parlor had become terrible. She leaned against the wall, as if she would have tottered from terror, from dread of what I might reveal of her former secret confidences. And, stretching toward me both her trembling hands, she cried in a stifled, imploring voice:

"Monsieur Aubry, I beseech you, don't say that. . . . You have no right—nor I, either—I have no right to say that!"

And the poor woman suddenly broke down in a terrible nervous attack.

The clerk, the lawyers, and the prosecuting attorney had hastened to her assistance. Mon-

sieur Marathon, flushed, perspiring, astounded, did not know which way to turn.

Pauline Mutel, at the left of the room, struck with amazement, now burst into irrational sobs by this unexpected spectacle.

"You see, your Honour," I said, with genuine grief, pointing to Pauline Mutel, "this is the result of your own nonsense!"

Then, stretching my hand toward Pauline Steurs, who had fainted, I added:

"And that is the result of mine!"

XVII

AN UNEXPECTED EVENT

AFTER such a day, I could scarcely pass a quiet night. Besides the discomfort of my cell, my mind was too much agitated by fresh suffering to be able to rest and sleep, even though it were the sleep of the just! It was no longer my own case which absorbed my thoughts, nor even my wife's. Strong in my own innocence, I did not doubt hers.

My counsel had brought me, that very evening, an encouraging remark of the prosecuting attorney. The latter, after the touching scene which has just been described, had been unable to refrain from saying to Monsieur Marathon, in a vaguely prophetic tone:

"That man is innocent!"

To which the judge, astounded by the scene with Pauline Steurs, had retorted:

"Patience! Let us wait for what comes next! We shall see!"

I understood very well that my imaginary interpretation of the crime had borne its first-fruit in the mind of the prosecuting attorney, and that the fainting of Otto van Brymans' wife and her words of terror were going to bear a second.

A problem of conscience was placed before me. I had the right to defend myself,—certainly! But had I to accuse? It seemed to me that Pauline Steurs, the exhausted woman who obeyed only a sort of instinct, had just given me a severe lesson! Her situation, besides, was more distracting than mine! And it was she, under these painful circumstances, who showed prudence and good sense.

I had the excuse of having imagined a fable for the use of the incomprehensible Monsieur Marathon, whose perspicacity was scarcely formidable, and I shielded myself behind this tolerably cowardly excuse. But I did not cherish any delusions concerning the horizons I had been able to open to the prosecuting attorney, a far

more subtle man since it was he who had led me to provoke, by a thoughtless impulse, the alarming protest of Otto van Brymans' wife.

Ah! the confidences of Pauline Steurs! How I lived them over again that night, in my cell, with my eyes staring into the darkness, my mind tense, my heart oppressed! I felt prisoned in an armature in which I was stifling! It was she, and she alone, who furnished me with all the conjectures which were capable of enlightening the drama, in the direction that I had indicated to the court—and it was she who was suddenly forbidding me to use them!

And, on careful reflection, I could not ignore her prohibition without danger to her, if not to myself! To her who was unwilling to give evidence, perhaps cherishing the chimerical hope of once more finding alive through some miracle Otto, her husband, the father of her little Fritz!

The only decent attitude that I could maintain was that of extreme prudence since with my suppositions, however well regulated they

might be, I could, after all, do nothing more in the impossibility of hastening the development alone.

Ah! the confidences of Pauline Steurs! I again saw her in the chimney corner, shading her face from the heat of the hearth, and saying gravely:

“Otto is good, and Franz is not.”

I heard her say, in her slow, monotonous voice:

“If there is any difference between them, I am the only person in the world to perceive it . . . I assure you of that! Otto is good because he is happy, with me and his little Fritz—and Franz is not happy!”

I recalled the landscape of Borgerhout, the Turnhout road, where Otto had gone one Sunday to ask the parents of Pauline Steurs for her hand. The sentimental and somewhat confused adventure of this artless girl, caught between the enigmatical countenance of Franz and the expressionless face, exactly like,—too much like it,—of the man to whom she belonged with all her heart and all her maternity! My

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own question came back to my mind with precision:

“And in those ten years has he never made an allusion to the marriage which might have taken place between you and him, if he had gone to ask your parents for your hand before Otto?”

In the oppressive silence of the prison, with an illusion of extraordinary sharpness, it seemed as if I heard her reply, equally exact:

“Yes! Once he asked me, ‘In case Otto should die, Pauline, would you take me for a husband!’”

And it was her hissing voice and jeering contempt:

“Oh! You! Never!”

Then the dull tone which followed and the final comment opening the door to all sorts of hypotheses, the one I had suggested, those the court might make:

“Since then he has never opened his lips again for such a proposition! Since! He is always there, around me, near his brother Otto, near our little Fritz. He is always there, *among*

us all. And there is not a single human being in the whole world except myself to divine that he is not happy."

Physical fatigue had at last conquered my resistance and I fell into a slumber, haunted by dreams and nightmares.

When the jailer waked me early in the morning, I found myself stiff in every limb, depressed, without strength. The image which I employed to express my suffering of the night before was still more applicable after this first night of solitude. I felt more than ever as if I were compressed in an armature in which I was stifling. It was the scruples of Pauline Steurs that crowded upon me, in the depths of my memory; her confidences, which I no longer had the right to use. And I vowed to hold myself upright in this improvised armour, in whose shelter I felt invulnerable, to brave the perspicacity of the prosecuting attorney, whose words, "This man is innocent!" seemed to me from this moment of evil augury. And by what follows it shall be judged whether I kept my difficult oath—to the end.

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I was surprised that I did not receive a visit from my counsel in the morning. Not that Maître Croulebarbe could be of any great assistance, or that I might hope for any efficacious aid from him, but his society was agreeable to me, and I could divine in his little indiscretions especially what he did not want to reveal.

I was amazed, besides, that I was not summoned to the office of the examining magistrate. He had shown so much haste the day before in arresting first myself, then Pauline Mutel, in discovering the corpse of the sailor Shoepen, and in examining Otto van Brymans' wife, that I could not get into my head the idea of seeing, at the end of twenty-four hours so badly employed, an interruption in so desultory an investigation.

It was after luncheon that I learned how great was my error in having believed in the inaction of the court.

It was after luncheon, toward one o'clock in the afternoon, that I knew how the judge had employed his morning, by what really amazing accident he had been led—like everybody—in

his investigations by the hand of chance. And I dare affirm that, in its agitating effect upon my already strained nerves, it exceeded the recognition at the Morgue of the murdered man, and even the dead body discovered in the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf.

It was toward one o'clock in the afternoon that Maître Croulebarbe suddenly burst into my cell. He had put on, for so solemn an occasion, his lawyer's robe, and waving his large sleeves, with his cap set awry, he made me think of a bat knocking against the walls in the dusk! He exclaimed while on the threshold in a joyous voice, the announcer of a speedy liberation:

"Ah! My friend! What a sudden event! Your innocence is as clear as daylight. And it is no longer anything but a question of hours to get you out of here!"

He had grasped both my hands and was shaking the forearms with a satisfaction which was positively contagious. Eager for information, I stammered:

"But yet . . ."

"This is it!" he cried. "The drama which

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appeared obscure is remarkably clear! The clue to the riddle has at last been discovered! Otto van Brymans has just been found alive!"

At these words I stood with my mouth wide open. My eyes must have had a disturbing fixity, for he went on:

"Come, one would say that this surprises you!"

I had some difficulty in answering. At last I faltered:

"Otto? Otto van Brymans?"

"Why, yes, Otto—Otto, to be sure—the brother of Franz, assassinated evidently by the sailor Shopen! Otto, who has just been found at the foot of the cliffs, in the gobe which his unfortunate brother had leased, on the night of the crime, from Simon of the Place Duquesne. . . . You remember it very well. Come!"

I passed my hand across my brow and repeated stupidly:

"Otto! Otto van Brymans—found alive!"

And this very simple thing appeared to me extravagant!

Maître Croulebarbe, whom until then I had

considered a silent person, in spite of his title of pleader inscribed among the lawyers of the city, continued to harangue:

“Thus, once more, fact surpasses fiction! It may truly be said that one plain fact has more eloquence than all the stories invented! I don’t wish to take anything from your merits, nor those of Monsieur Marathon, but you went very far to seek what was close at hand! It is not a flash of genius on the part of the judge which has put everybody on the true scent, as you might believe: it was some street boys of the harbour who, going to play diabolos on the beach, heard groans in Simon’s gobe and went to tell the people who were passing on the quay. The latter burst the door open and discovered in a condition even more pitiable than yours—you will see the poor man—Otto van Brymans, whom they hastened to rescue and have taken to the police station to revive him with stimulants.”

I had sat down upon my prison cot, my limbs giving way under the emotion caused by this fourth discovery. All my reasoning powers had

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yielded to an unexpected joy. Through the stupor of my emotion I caught a glimpse of the resurrection of Otto as an actual miracle which I had neither the time, nor the means, nor the strength to discuss.

I shared the demonstrative joy of my counsel, and followed only the letter of his story, without seeking for the moment to disentangle its spirit. The whole event assumed in my imagination the authority of an article of faith which we do not discuss! Otto was alive! Otto was alive!

Maitre Croulebarbe had drawn near me the only white wooden stool which furnished my cell, and quietly seated himself upon it.

"Ah!" he went on. "The horrible experience which he has had! You at least had the good fortune to be knocked senseless, while he underwent all imaginable horrors, and it is greatly feared that his mind will be affected! I have had the honour of being present at the recital of this terrible adventure, which he has just given Monsieur Marathon, and I am going to tell you about it."

"That's right," I said. "Tell me quickly, I beg you!"

"Oh! have no fear," Maître Croulebarbe continued; "there is not the least contradiction in his deposition to what you have stated to the court! Nothing could be more favourable to you; it is the complete demonstration, without any possible contradiction, of your innocence and that of Pauline Mutel, your wife!"

Egotism is decidedly the first of human virtues: I felt endowed with it and, thinking only of my personal safety, I persisted:

"Then it was Shoepen entirely alone?"

"Entirely alone?—You are going to hear! Listen without interrupting me! In the first place, Otto stated that nothing had led him to foresee so horrible a crime. He had noticed that his brother's belt, filled with money, had attracted the sailor's attention in the tavern, but he believed he knew Shoepen to be an honest fellow from their earliest childhood, and he was very far from suspecting his criminal designs! Nor would he ever have thought that Shoepen could simulate so visible an intoxication to

draw Franz, his unfortunate brother, into a snare! The bold bandits were going to attempt a double deed. . . ."

"So there are accomplices?" I interrupted.

"You are going to know! You had had the imprudence to take Shoeper to your room, and Franz had been so unwise as to open his money bag to settle the bills. He thought that a man in your position must possess much more valuable things in his trunks than Franz did in his belt. That is the reason you and Franz were the two victims designated."

"J, Franz—and Otto!" I corrected.

Maître Croulebarbe made an evasive gesture with his arms, waving their wide, floating sleeves, and I thought the bat was going to resume its flight and knock its head against the walls of my cell.

"Here is, however," he went on, with a manner of addressing an audience, "what Otto van Brymans has stated that he knows concerning the drama."

I will follow this story, whose confirmation I had later, which I have endeavoured, as scru-

pulously as the lawyer, to repeat with absolute accuracy and, if the reader still finds in it any obscurity, it is not my fault, nor Otto's, but solely that of the events which have unfolded—one might say according to design—during the night!

XVIII

WHAT OTTO VAN BRYMANS STATED THAT HE KNEW OF THE DRAMA

It may be imagined how the news was carried through the little city, already greatly excited by the double murder of the night before! From the suburb of Neuville and the end of the Rue de la Barre people came in crowds to the shore to see the survivor of the horrible drama.

Poor Otto was in a pitiable condition; he had been soundly thrashed and thrown into the gobe, into which the assassins had locked him, and it was a miracle that he had not died.

Simon, of the Place Duquesne, who had rented the gobe to Franz the evening before, as he testified, had been one of the first to run there, and had protested, with the natural feeling of the owner:

“You had no occasion to force the door—when there is a passage halfway down the cliff!”

But this passage, if it was known by him and by Franz, was certainly unknown by the murderers and Otto; otherwise the latter, who had succeeded in releasing himself from his bonds, would not have had to call for help and owe his liberty to the street urchins who had come to play on the beach.

Everybody pressed forward to help Otto. He seemed weak and exhausted, his clothes were in disorder, and he appeared dazed by the light of day. It is no exaggeration to write that he was carried to the police station like a real conqueror, by a crowd whose dull common sense divined that this man, found alive, was going to reveal the truth which, hitherto, had been so difficult to unravel. But neither is it an exaggeration to state that Monsieur Marathon, in his single person, was as elated with satisfaction as the whole throng of idlers united!

At last he had some one to whom he could talk! And, when Otto was able to answer, he did not deprive himself of his favourite pastime of making "explanations of the matter."

But Otto, who shook his big, expressionless

face, whose features were haggard from the forty-eight hours of fasting and suffering which he had experienced, timidly tried to stop him.

"I know, your Honour, that my unfortunate brother has been murdered, and that the wretch Shopen, as if there were really a Providence, has met the fate which he deserved!"

There was only one thing which Otto did not know: that is, that I was alive, in jail, as well as Franz's sweetheart, both accused of this double murder. He was even ignorant that Pauline Mutel was my divorced wife. So, when the judge informed him of the situation, he uttered a word which admirably depicted his amazement, for he believed me dead.

"But that is madness!" he cried.

Monsieur Marathon, who assumed to possess his senses, was vexed at the word and asked him to confine himself to enlightening the court.

"Your Honour," said Otto feebly, raising his left hand to his forehead, as if to chase away some terrible vision—for he seemed to be suffering some pain in the right, which he carried thrust into the opening of his shirt, against the

skin—"I have kept, I swear to you, an undying memory of every minute! . . . We had gone, Monsieur Aubry and I, to the stable, to prepare for our departure, while waiting for Franz, who had taken Shoepen back to the *Arbalète*. I must say that I was very tipsy, but what happened afterward was well calculated to sober me!"

"I believe you," said the judge, touched with pity.

"We were in the stable waiting for Franz, when we thought we heard his footsteps outside. Monsieur Aubry was holding the lantern, a wretched lantern with a candle that scarcely lighted the place at all, when, suddenly, all at once, I saw Monsieur Aubry totter and fall on the floor . . . and the lantern went out! This had been so rapid, so unexpected, that I had not time to distinguish anything in the dark. By instinct, without knowing it, I uttered a cry, 'Murder!' I could not make a second. Two men had rushed upon me, thrown a coarse woollen scarf over my head, and, in less than a minute, unable to move, I was gagged, bound

with the reins of the harness—a worthless bundle!”

“Take breath, my friend,” Monsieur Marathon entreated.

“To tell the truth,” Otto went on, “I believe that I fainted. But how long my state of unconsciousness lasted I should be unable to state to you! I am not easily frightened, as a rule, your Honour, and am inclined to lay it entirely to the credit of my drinking bout! Nevertheless, when I came to my senses, my ideas cleared, and I tried to understand what was going on. If it was impossible for me to struggle, if I could see nothing of the scene on account of the woollen over my face, I could use my ears, and I heard one of the men say to the other, ‘That one’s account is settled!’ The other answered: ‘Yes! Exactly on the temple! It hit!’ I did not know the voice of either of these ruffians. I understood that they were talking about Monsieur Aubry, but that is all I could make out.

“I felt that they were turning me over on the straw; one of the men rummaged through my pockets, took out my pocketbook and emp-

tied it. However, I heard the dialogue: 'Thirty-seven francs four sous!—'Tisn't worth as much as the other!' I understood that the other must again be Monsieur Aubry!

"Then there was silence for at least a quarter of an hour. After that I plainly distinguished the voice of the sailor Shoepen. Oh! that I can swear before God and man! I know Shoepen's voice, you may be sure! We were brought up together! I heard him say: 'It's done. . . . But I left my knife sticking in him! Some people were turning out of one of the streets. I couldn't stay there! Forward! You are sure of your boat?'

"Then men took me up on their shoulders. I vainly tried to guess what they were going to do with me. I was frozen with terror, and believed that they meant to throw me into the docks!

"I am not usually a coward, I swear to you, but at that moment I thought of my wife and my little Fritz—and would have been glad to cry out to them for mercy! 'Don't do him any harm!' Shoepen ordered. And I felt myself

shaken about for some time. The keen air pierced through the woollen scarf. We had left the stable. I perceived that the men were stepping on a boat, I heard the sound of the oars, and the chill of death began to run through every bone in my body."

"Br-r-r-r!" interrupted Monsieur Marathon. "You make me shudder!"

"Ah! your Honour," said Otto—and at the memory aroused of that horrible night, a tear ran down his rough cheek—"I assure you that those were minutes a man doesn't forget."

"I can certainly well believe you! And these wretches took you to Simon's storehouse on the other side of the channel?"

"I did not recognise it until later. They had laid me on a bundle of straw. They had begun to count the money again, no doubt what they had found upon Monsieur Aubry—but it lasted a long time! I heard Shoepen make the division: 'Seventeen hundred from one—thirty-seven from the other—and one hundred and fifty on the artist. That will be six hundred and twenty-nine francs apiece for us, all round!'

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And I understood, with increasing terror, that the seventeen hundred francs were the money of my brother Franz . . . and that the unfortunate fellow had perhaps suffered a more dreadful fate than mine!

"Then they quarrelled among themselves, but I no longer understood the meaning of the dispute! I caught: 'You promised us . . . It wasn't worth killing two men for,' and other startling sentences, of which I heard only fragments. Shoepen flew into a violent rage: 'If you think I want to fleece you out of what there is in the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf, come along! But the boat is waiting for us—and it is a great risk!' They went away. I was left alone.

"The sound of the sea, close by, reached me. I lived only through my ears, I may say! On being alone, I vainly tried to release myself from my bonds. I had been tied so tight that the leather of the reins was cutting into my arms and legs."

"And do you think that this fine band went to the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf with the hope of get-

ting Monsieur Aubry's hoard of money?" broke in the judge, wondering at so many exact details.

"I had the certainty of it at the end of about an hour," pursued the narrator, after having swallowed a drink of whiskey the clerk offered him. "I say an hour as I would say two, for you may imagine that time never seemed so long to me in all my life."

"It was at the end of about an hour that the assassins came back. . . . I no longer distinguished Shoepen's voice. One said, 'If he thought he would beat us, it is he who has got it!' And again they began their terrible division, 'This will make nine hundred and forty francs each!' The other hurried him, 'We mustn't let daylight overtake us . . . the ship is waiting.'

"Of what ship were they talking? I thought of the *Arbalète*; but, in calculating approximately the time which had passed, I perceived that I was not correct.

"One of them said again, 'And the fellow there?' The other answered, 'What's the

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use?' I was not mistaken; they were talking about me.

"They must have been intoxicated with their murders, like real savages. Did they want to boast of them, as is told of many criminals?

"Nevertheless, one of them leaned toward me. His breath scorched my ear through the wool: 'Listen,' he said, 'if you ever denounce us, your business will be settled, as surely as Franz, your brother's, stabbed by Shoepen; as surely as Shoepen's himself, whom we strangled just now in revenge for having been cheated! Shoepen promised us a much larger sum of money for such a deed. It's plain that he had robbed the artist's room, since we found nothing there. So his account was quickly settled, as quickly as yours would be, if you told the police. . . .'

"His companion interrupted him: 'The ring, look at it. . . . That was why he cut off the other's finger!'

"They had taken off the woollen scarf which muffled my head. I was going to see them. . . . I had not time to do so.

"I fainted . . . and this is the reason."

Otto drew out from between his shirt and his flesh his right hand.

He cautiously unwrapped his handkerchief, and held before the astounded eyes of Monsieur Marathon and the prosecuting attorney the hand which, precisely like the right hand of his unfortunate brother Franz, the fish-dealer, lacked the little finger with the betraying ring.

"Oh! the savages! the savages!" cried the judge, stamping his foot, genuinely moved by so terrible a misfortune. "For the value of a wretched silver ring!"

But he was so happy, in reality, to see his difficult investigation divested of all mystery by this truthful recital that he eagerly exclaimed imprudently:

"Be calm, my poor man. We will capture the ruffians, and we will make them pay for their crimes!"

Otto, thinking of his own tortures, and of the tragical end of his unfortunate brother, replied:

"They will never be punished for them enough!"

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His sorrowful eyes, dimmed by the suffering and anguish of these forty-eight hours of horror, wandered over the assembly. Everywhere he saw the same pity for his fate, the same distress depicted upon all their faces—and he burst into sobs.

XIX

IN WHICH THE PROSECUTING ATTORNEY REQUESTS MY ASSISTANCE

MAÎTRE CROULEBARBE's trade was to be eloquent. He had been so in his narrative almost to the boundary of the pathetic; and I am really afraid that the transcription I have just given does not attain the height of the model!

But his eloquence, after all, was only the reflection of Otto's, who, if he had put less art into it, had surely shown more real and personal emotion.

I was anxious to see the poor man again, to clasp him in my arms and congratulate him! I thought of the happiness of his wife and his little Fritz, and really shared in it, as if I had had some right to do so! To this satisfaction was added that of escaping from the clutches of an investigation from which one never knows in what condition one will emerge!

"It is no longer anything but a matter of

hours!" repeated my counsel. "Recover your spirits, and let us congratulate ourselves on so happy an epilogue. For, aside from your hundred and fifty francs . . ."

"I thought that I had been robbed of them by the attentions of the law, and that my pocket-book was in the recorder's office. But I shall easily comfort myself for them."

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Half an hour after this conversation I was taken out of my cell with the same ceremonial as the evening before. But it must be believed that the wind of public opinion had changed, for I no longer saw in front of my prison the same throng of hostile and stupid idlers who had annoyed me when I came out on the former occasions.

I even had the pleasure of meeting Pauline Mutel, my wife, also attended by her counsel. She experienced the same selfish joy in feeling that she would soon be delivered from so terrible an accusation, and our warders carried their condescension so far as to conduct us together to the judge's office.

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It is just here that I regret being only an artist, accustomed to paint merely visible things, and not at all a literary man! It is here that I envy the eloquence of Maître Croulebarbe! It is barely possible for me to express with words and imagery the emotion I felt on finding myself in the presence of this unfortunate Otto! And neither shall I find the precise word, nor the exact image, to describe the inexpressible emotion of the worthy man when he threw himself affectionately into my open arms, exclaiming:

"Ah! Monsieur Aubry! It seems as if I ought to ask your forgiveness for all the terrible things which have happened to you! Isn't it monstrous? Isn't it enough to drive one crazy?"

The tears which he shed won me. I warmly pressed his sound hand and looked at the mutilated one, which the physician had just dressed. And I gazed at his kindly eyes, his face haggard from all the agonies he had endured.

It was Otto! Honest Otto, alive, safe, with his smooth-shaven, resolute countenance, which

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was illumined this time by all the mingled feelings which agitated him.

"Ah! What a hurry I am in to see Pauline and my little Fritz again, Monsieur Aubry!"

He evoked with vivid words, in a voice trembling with indignation, the whole drama, as it had unfolded.

"Who would ever have been able to suspect it? Foresee? Imagine? I ask you! The good God himself . . ."

"Pooh!" said Monsieur Marathon. "The good God, you may well believe, has something else to do than to trouble Himself about brigands like your sailor Shoepen! The main thing for you is that you are here, safe and sound!"

And instantly addressing himself to Pauline Mutel and myself:

"You two, for instance, can also boast of escaping from a great danger, in another order of ideas! I am going presently to sign your provisory release."

"Provisory?" asked Maître Croulebarbe, in astonishment.

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"I say provisory because my investigation is not at an end! If Shoepen has simplified matters by escaping from the power of justice, it remains for us to discover his two accomplices . . . and I beg of you, monsieur and madame, to hold yourselves at our disposal."

Then the ineffable old codger jested:

"The essential thing for you is quite the contrary. The main thing is to be here no longer, isn't it?"

Pauline Mutel remained sitting in her chair, erect, as if hypnotised, without a movement, without a gesture. Otto stared at her with curiosity, and said to me in an embarrassed manner:

"The judge told me just now . . . that Franz's sweetheart was your wife. Oh, that is a coincidence!"

And he lowered his eyes through delicacy. The good fellow was probably afraid that he might give me pain.

He turned:

"Do you want me to wait for you? Will you go back with me to Biville? I am going

to take Simon's carriage. You would give me great pleasure, Monsieur Aubry—and Pauline—and my little Fritz!”

I was touched by his affectionate feeling.

“No, Otto!” I replied. “Go back quickly, to give them the joy of seeing you again! Your wife and child will be so happy! Do not lose a minute! Each moment that you linger is so much the more suffering for them to bear! I promise, my friend, that I will go and wish you happiness to-morrow!”

“You promise me, Monsieur Aubry?” he replied, pressing my hands very hard. “I thank you for it.”

“We shall need you one of these days, Monsieur van Brymans!” called the prosecuting attorney, in his sharp voice; “according to the trails the police find, or do not find, concerning Shoepen's accomplices!”

Otto went back to the door:

“I shall be at your service, gentlemen!” he said.

Pauline Mutel was still sitting in her chair, without movement or gesture.

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"There is nothing more, except the formality of the release," Maître Croulebarbe whispered to me.

"That is unnecessary!" replied Monsieur Marathon, who had heard him.

And the worthy magistrate, glad to regain his footing upon a more substantial territory than our two romances, made a gesture of pardon as he added:

"You are free!"

Pauline Mutel went out with drooping head. I thought I noticed that she avoided my eyes, and I was slightly wounded by it.

The prosecuting attorney had risen and left the table where the magistrate was presiding. Coming toward me, and putting his hand cordially on my shoulder, he said:

"I want to talk with you, Monsieur Aubry."

I saw his cold, reserved face brighten with a smile that bore a close resemblance to a sneer, and he added, in a thoroughly intimate tone which I did not recognise in him:

"Oh! I'm not speaking to the prisoner this time,—it is to the friend."

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At first I did not understand the meaning of this exaggeration. He had pushed open a little padded door which led into his private office, and we were soon alone together.

He had thrust both hands into the pockets of his trousers and raised his shoulders as he walked about the room in search of something. At last he stopped, sat down, made me take my place opposite to him and, holding out his cigarette case, asked:

“Do you smoke?”

I thanked him for his kind offer.

“Come,” he said, “let us talk frankly—between ourselves. Give me your opinion.”

Fixing his stern eyes on me, he let fall the words:

“Is this really Otto—Isn’t it more likely to be Franz?”

As thoroughly master of myself as he was of himself, I looked him full in the face, but, as he was now lighting his cigarette, with his eyes cast down, I could see nothing of the expression of his countenance, which apparently remained placid.

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"Monsieur," I said, in reply to this terrible question, trying to laugh, "I suppose you are not going to add a new chapter to Monsieur Marathon's romance?"

"No," he said. "It is your own romance which has struck me by reason of its probability."

"But there is nothing left of it!" I answered, endeavouring to escape.

"Do you think so? Didn't you tell your eminent counsel that, if we should find Otto with his right hand mutilated like that of Franz, neither you, nor any person in the world, could affirm with certainty which might be Franz and which Otto?"

"Don't let us play upon the words," I protested. "I said, 'If you should find the body of Otto . . .'. Now it is Otto, alive, who has been found, and we cannot doubt his identity, since he is here, living, to affirm it."

"That is understood! Your intuition of the future, however extraordinary it may appear, is surpassed by the result."

And, fixing upon me the full insolence of his look, he added:

"Nevertheless, I still have to challenge you to give us indisputable proof that it is Otto who has just testified before us!"

I did not yield in the improvised armour in which I was stifling.—I made no reply.

He sent out two or three puffs of smoke and, after a silence, feigned to be irritated.

"Oh, very well! I thought I should find in you a useful assistant, but I perceive that, after having pointed out to the court the way to follow in order to arrive at the certainty of the truth, you leave us in the lurch. That is your right, monsieur—but we know our duty."

"Oh! as for that," I rebelled, "I don't think I am qualified . . ."

"Then it is settled," he interrupted drily. —"I could not foresee that your inquisitiveness was guided solely by your personal interest!"

And he rose to signify that I might take my leave, saluting me with a cold and haughty in-

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clination of the head. Evidently I was no longer his friend. But the point upon which I especially congratulated myself was in no longer being the prisoner—and, moreover, in not becoming his accomplice.

XX

SOUVENIRS OF DIEPPE

THE first impression, when I found myself free in the streets of the city, was to feel absolutely unconnected with the tragical adventure in which I had played so wretched a part.

Until now the power of the facts, the horror of the various sights I had had before my eyes, the instinct of self-preservation, the influence of the presumptions, the obligation of defending myself, had jointly urged me to consider myself, if not the essential pivot of this dramatic and famous affair, at least as one of the most important pieces of the machinery.

And now that I was suddenly delivered, scarcely escaped from the atmosphere of suffering in which I had lived forty-eight hours, I desired nothing except a delicious rest, a sort of forgetfulness of what had happened.

I was somewhat in the condition of the

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dreamer who wakes from a horrible nightmare, utters a sigh of satisfaction at finding himself in the presence of a calmer reality, and asks of the beneficent shower bath the blotting out of excessive emotions.

The strange proposition of the prosecuting attorney had affected me less than I had supposed; I regarded it as a prolongation of the gentle mania of the legal gentlemen, and would not confess to myself that, after all, he had told the truth,—that it was I who had suggested to him this unreasonable and last supposition, which consisted in doubting Otto's identity, for the sole purpose of invalidating his story!

But I was not going out of one nightmare to enter another!—Ah, no! No!

The bright sunshine, the keen air, the bustle in the streets, all the joy of life which was circulating around me, fairly dazzled me and I enjoyed its charm in an animal way, I may say, without thinking any more about it!

My first impulse was to go to the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf, reassure my landlady with regard to me, and prove that I was not the assassin of

the sailor Shoepen! Nonsense! I had plenty of time, and I decided to take a walk along the beach.

Then, in the solitude in which I found myself, it was natural that I should think of Pauline Mutel, my wife. It was almost logical that I should be led to pay her a visit. There was a new and tolerably strong bond between us; the community in misfortune. I had felt its sweetness in the few instants when we had found ourselves face to face, and I was sure that she had not been unaware of it herself.

This is why I was not surprised at being, toward five o'clock in the afternoon, on the Place Moulin-à-Vent, in front of the little shop which bore the sign, *Souvenirs de Dieppe*.

Again the irony of the sign pursued me! Surely I had made an ample harvest of souvenirs, and very quickly, in this little city!

Pauline was standing as she had been two days before, when with Otto I had seen her again for the first time on the threshold of the open shop, her uplifted arm resting against the

door frame. One might have thought she had not stirred from the place since then. This time she did not blush when she saw me. She did not even go back inside. She really appeared as if she were waiting for me.

Moreover, she did not hide it. As I approached her, raising my hat, like a stranger who apologises for entering a house that is not his own, she said to me gently, simply, without the slightest embarrassment:

“I was waiting for you, Maxime!”

I was agitated by this name which came, at the end of three years, with a charming intonation which I thought I had forgotten. I hesitated what bearing I ought to assume. I could show neither too much affection, nor too much coldness. My situation was a delicate one. Between the ordinary shake of the hand, and the cordial embrace, I could not at once think of a greeting which might not wound her or move her too strongly! She saved me from embarrassment immediately by simply, without the least affectation, lifting her forehead to me as she had formerly done—three years ago.

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For the sake of saying something, I stammered:

"It would have been hard for me to go without seeing you again."

"And for me, too," she answered. "I have to ask your pardon . . ."

"For what?" I interrupted. "I have no right to have any complaints against you!"

She had drawn a chair forward. I sat down—as if I were at home—actually! And she said to me:

"Will you have anything? Are you thirsty?"

Then she went to the door to drive away the urchins who were crowding in front of the shop, pressing their curious faces against the window-panes like masqueraders at a carnival.

"Ah!" she sighed. "It is going to be unbearable! The neighbours turn their backs upon me, as if I were plague-stricken! I was pointed at, in the street, when I took down the shutters of my shop again . . . and I feel sure that the business by which I earned my living will scarcely be possible any longer."

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I was distressed by her dejected manner, and I tried to soothe her mental depression:

"This will pass away! Public opinion changes quickly, you know; and, when it is shown that you are entirely unconnected with this drama, you will find sympathy returning."

She had sat down near me.

"Whose sympathy?" she asked, in an expressionless voice.

I seized the opportunity of showing an easy generosity, and replied:

"You have gained mine entirely, Pauline!"

She was greatly moved by my answer, and I will not conceal that my emotion was also evident. Twilight was beginning to gather, we were in a deepening dusk, which gave our secret thoughts a more painful mystery. Perhaps we had many things to say to each other after nearly three years of separation. Probably we did not know exactly what. And we remained for quite a long time, sitting side by side, as if drowned in a flood of confused thoughts!

Night had almost fallen. The darkness weighed upon me. I could have wished that

she would rise, that she would go away from me, that she would light the lamp. But she did not yet stir from her place. At last she summoned up courage enough to say:

"I wanted to ask your advice!"

"About what?"

"About . . . about the drama! I did not know Otto. . . . And I can have little personal idea. . . . Then, unfortunately, I have had your idea!"

She had drawn her chair nearer to mine. . . . I felt her close beside me. She repeated:

"Your idea . . . the idea you expressed before the examining magistrate."

Then suddenly, as if frantic, she threw both arms around my neck, rested her head upon my shoulder, and in a heartrending voice, faint with fear, she faltered:

"Isn't it Franz? . . . I am *certain* that it is Franz!"

I had cautiously released myself from her embrace and, moving gently away from her, while still holding one of her hands in mine, I replied in a tone of confidence, which was rendered

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firmer by the darkness, for I was now glad not to have any light to show her my disturbed countenance and to see her anxious face:

"Come, Pauline! You are not sensible! Things cannot be distorted at pleasure! Otto's presence completely destroys my hypothesis, from top to bottom."

She persisted:

"For my part, I maintain that it is Franz!"

I rose. I was in haste to escape from this contagious suffering. I kissed her on the forehead, and again assured her of my sympathy. She said to me:

"I probably shall not see you again?"

"Yes, yes," I protested. "I shall return before my departure!"

I perceived that she was weeping silently. If I had obeyed only my nerves, I should have cried:

"I forgive you, Pauline! I do not believe in Providence, and yet I ask myself whether the reason for this obscure drama has not been to reunite us! Let us forget our mutual wrongs! Let us fly together! Let us leave this city where

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you have been so unhappy! It is Providence which dictates my duty!"

But I did not listen to my nerves. They were too greatly overexcited. I had not the calmness which was necessary in order to utter words so decisive. I had the clear-sightedness of the situation. So I said to her simply and awkwardly:

"Farewell, Pauline!"

"That is right! Farewell, Maxime!" she replied.

And I found myself outside, my heart more full of bitterness than before. Night had closed in entirely. I asked two or three passers-by to direct me to the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf, where my landlady, who had been informed of my release, was waiting for me with still a little feeling of apprehension.

"After all, monsieur," she said to me, "you are innocent, it appears—and that is no misfortune! My cousin, Mère Vincent, at Tréport, has been made ill by it!"

She added:

"I have changed the sheets on the bed . . .

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isn't that right? . . . on account of the death
. . . on account of the sailor Shoepen! ”

I asked her for the address of the nearest restaurant.

“ By the way,” she said, “ do you know the rumour that is going about the city—since Otto van Brymans has been found in Simon’s gobe? ”

“ No,” I replied.

She lowered her voice, looked around her to see if any one was within hearing and, as if terrified by the supposition, whispered:

“ There are some people who say that it isn’t Otto . . . that it is Franz, the fish-dealer . . . and that apparently it was he . . . who murdered his brother and the sailor Shoepen! ”

“ They are crazy! ” I replied abruptly, turning on my heel.

She called after me:

“ Wait! There is a letter for you, brought by the little footman of the Café Suisse, from Maître Croulebarbe, the lawyer! ”

I took my counsel’s envelope and nervously broke the seal. And I read with frowning brow,

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annoyed by the prospect of fresh vexations, this laconic note:

Come and see me to-morrow morning, without fail. Something monstrous is going to happen.

XXI

UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES MAÎTRE CROULEBARBE INTRODUCES ME TO A GENTLEMAN WITH LIGHT EYES

THE next morning, toward nine o'clock, I presented myself at Maître Croulebarbe's. He lived in a pretty apartment on the Place du Puits-Salé. The maid ushered me into a drawing-room with old-fashioned furniture and archaic hangings, where I waited for a good quarter of an hour, at the end of which I was shown into the office of the young lawyer, who was engaged in a very animated conversation with a visitor whom I did not know.

I saw very plainly by Maître Croulebarbe's face, by his constrained manner and his awkwardness, that he would have preferred to receive me without this guest. He introduced me to him in a rapid manner and with a very careless air.

"Monsieur Théodule—the distinguished archæologist!"

Then, turning to Monsieur Théodule:

"Monsieur Maxime Aubry, the artist!"

"The hero of the van Brymans affair?"

Monsieur Théodule completed the sentence, throwing his head against the back of his arm-chair and staring anxiously at me with his blue eyes, extraordinarily light in colour, whose fixedness caused discomfort from the very first look.

Forcing a smile, I disclaimed:

"Oh! it is never agreeable to be a hero of newspaper gossip."

"But," replied the gentleman with the light eyes, carefully straightening the crease in his trousers, and the tails of his coat, "consider that all your talent would not have succeeded in making you as well known as this mysterious drama, which has engrossed the attention of the press. . . . So you don't read the papers? You are the man of the day! Your portrait is displayed on the first page of the great dailies, and I do not doubt that your fame as an artist

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will be much increased by this gratuitous and unsought publicity."

"Yes, yes," I said, laughing. "But I should have preferred anything else."

Maître Croulebarbe interested himself in my health.

"Did you sleep well, Monsieur Aubry?"

"I may say," I replied, "that, without playing the sceptic, the memory of Shoepen, the sailor, did not haunt me too much in the bed where he had usurped my place, and that, of the three nights I have spent here in your city—the first on the straw of the stable of the Quay Henri IV, the second in my cell in the prison—this last, take it all in all, was the least uncomfortable."

I was still expecting that my counsel would explain what he had stated in his note the evening before, or rather I was expecting that Monsieur Théodule would go away, divining perfectly that Maître Croulebarbe did not intend to speak in his presence.

But Monsieur Théodule seemed little disposed to leave the place. He continued to stare

at me, with a persistence which surpassed the limits of good breeding—and this annoyed me on the part of so distinguished a gentleman.

Suddenly he said:

“You could not believe how deeply this affair of the van Brymans brothers excites me! I have followed it, as an amateur, a dilettante, but I think with even more interest than our friend, Monsieur Marathon!”

“Ah! do you know Monsieur Marathon?”

“We are expecting him presently,” interposed Maître Croulebarbe, “as well as the prosecuting attorney.”

I had unconsciously risen and began to take my leave.

“I will not intrude upon you longer, my dear Maître. . . . I will come back when you are less busy.”

Maître Croulebarbe appeared to be more and more embarrassed. But I had not time to carry my plan of retreat into execution. The maid came to announce the judge and the prosecuting attorney, and I at once had the vexation of

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finding myself with my companions of the evening before.

"Enchanted!" said the prosecuting attorney familiarly. "You are not in the way, Monsieur Aubry, on the contrary! It is for a special reason that we have come to Maître Croulebarbe's office to discuss the affair! There is no longer prosecuting attorney, judge, lawyer, nor prisoner, but a party of well-bred people, urged on by curiosity, and desirous of applying themselves to the solution of a difficult problem!"

And he almost forced me to sit down.

Monsieur Marathon, without taking any farther notice of me, had rushed toward Monsieur Théodule. He held under his arm a big book, which he instantly brandished in his nervous hand.

"Ah! this is wonderful!" he cried rapturously. "And to think that I, an examining magistrate, had never read it! I have spent a sleepless night in devouring your *Sherlock Holmes*—and this Conan Doyle is a clever fellow!"

Then, turning in my direction, he thought it his duty to present me in his turn, as if Maître Croulebarbe's introduction had not been sufficient to open my eyes:

"Monsieur Théodule—a friend—the correspondent of *I Know Everything*—the great magazine—who has come here expressly to follow the incidents of the van Brymans affair!"

The judge's tongue by no means disconcerted the gentleman with the light eyes, who maintained his impassive countenance as he set him right:

"I know Monsieur Aubry already—and we are the best friends in the world!"

I was beginning to grow uneasy. Into what hornets' nest had my counsel, with his urgent note, made me fall?

The maid had reappeared with tea and toast, and everybody prepared to do honour to the improvised luncheon on the lawyer's mahogany desk! I declined the sandwich and the hot drink, which I detest, and contented myself with a cigarette.

The judge had caught me by the lapels of my coat, and was breathing whiffs of rum into my face.

"Eh! Do we look like conspirators? This is the point in question! Outside of our official mission, to discuss, like sensible people, the most obvious probabilities,—and I suppose that you are going to help us in this, you who were the first to move in it."

I escaped from the judge's hold. The prosecuting attorney caught me by the arm in passing, like an old friend to whom one cannot refuse a little service.

"Monsieur Théodule," he insinuated, "is a well-trained psychologist, and I am curious to know what you two are going to be able to determine—if not actual truth—at least simple probability!"

My lawyer had not deceived me with his laconic note. Something monstrous was going to happen! I no longer had any illusions concerning Monsieur Théodule's psychology!

It was a sort of challenge to common sense that these men had united to hurl and, upon

my word, I felt inclined to take it up. I goaded myself as if to awaken an absurd point of honour! The folly of these excited people, in now pursuing the game of probabilities, had been aroused by my own words.

If, to defend myself against the fantastic accusation of the court, I had not invoked the famous resemblance between the twin brothers and clearly pointed out everything that was enigmatical in the adventure, they would not have discovered it! To create the first suspicions concerning the equivocal attitude of Franz, the fish-dealer, I had had to struggle against the dense blindness of every one, the prosecuting attorney, the judge, Pauline Mutel, and—even of Pauline Steurs! And, having now arrived at the culminating point of the affair, the affair which was being settled *naturally, logically* by the indisputable narrative of Otto, I was going henceforth to have to struggle against my own opinion in the beginning, which had taken root in the noddles of all these people.

This inversion of parts, after all, was not calculated to displease me! I found myself ex-

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cited by the unanimity in finding my own hypothesis reasonable which I now encountered. I have never liked to be of the same mind as everybody else! And gallantly, boldly I held my own against all these men, who were arguers by trade as well as by temperament.

We formed a circle around the mahogany table. The sandwiches had vanished, the teapot was empty, and the bottle of rum half used. We had lighted cigarettes. Monsieur Marathon, alone, had taken his pipe, which he was colouring wonderfully. It was he who made the first start:

“What we need, evidently, is a man of the type of Sherlock Holmes to unravel this affair of twins. I have read ‘The Urchin with the Big Eyes’ in a supplement. I attended last year a performance of ‘P’tites Michu’ at the Casino. I myself solved the affair of the mime Properce, where I had on my hands two women exactly alike, one of them without a head! But, for all that, it was not so difficult to unravel as this Belgian adventure!”

And, turning toward the correspondent of *I*

Know Everything, whom Maître Croulebarbe had presented to me as a most distinguished archæologist:

"Ah! if you were as skilful as the hero of Conan Doyle!"

"One can always try!" said, without any appearance of humility, the man who probably was neither journalist nor scholar.

"Hum!" interposed the prosecuting attorney, "the problem is a complex and delicate one."

"Delicate, above all!" I emphasised. "And I do not see in what way the brutal intervention of police investigation will assist you! If the solution given by Otto is correct, you only risk being stupid; if it is false, you no longer have the ability to prove it."

"Pardon me," said the prosecuting attorney. "Since yesterday we have fresh subjects for discussion. We have a telegram from the captain of the *Arbalète*, which has touched at Glasgow, and who informs us that his crew is complete—except Shoepen, of course! We have the testimony of the Danish sailors who were mixed

up in the fight of which you know, and who have all furnished an undeniable alibi! We have, in a word, the convincing proof that these accomplices do not exist, and we are, therefore, all the more certain that Otto van Brymans is incapable of giving us the slightest clue concerning them!"

"That proves that you are not any farther advanced than Otto—and that is all!"

"Yes! We are farther advanced than Otto," replied the prosecuting attorney, with a malicious smile. "We have received from Antwerp a report which enlightens us concerning the antecedents of the van Brymans brothers, the marriage of Pauline Steurs with Otto, the inheritance of Pauline Steurs, and the vexation which this marriage and this inheritance caused Franz, the fish-dealer, of course. We know—what you know, and ask only to know more about it, that is, what Pauline Steurs knows. It is to be supposed that this woman will not have a daily nervous attack like the one which tortured her when you had the imprudence to put us on the track."

"I even like to think," I interrupted sneeringly, "that, having found her husband again, she will henceforth be safe from them."

"Unless," Monsieur Théodule insinuated, "she should be more subject to them than ever! But that is not the real question."

The discussion had assumed too many fine distinctions to interest Monsieur Marathon any longer. His principal occupation now was making paper pellets from the lawyer's blotting-pad.

"In short," he said, "to settle this little problem we must first, cost what it may, force this woman to confess."

"Yes," I retorted, "settle it—by an absurdity!"

"Well reasoned!" quickly remarked the gentleman with the light eyes. "I, who am not a professional, but a simple amateur, feel solely anxious concerning the motives. The motive of jealousy, such as the judge conceived it, by inculcating you, had a little air of probability, which you will not deny."

"No," I replied.

"The motive of interest, the robbery, such as Otto presented it to us, in accusing the sailor Shoepen, has another . . ."

"Evidently nearer the truth," interrupted the attentive prosecuting attorney.

"Evidently!" Monsieur Théodule repeated. "So what we must find, to discover the truth itself, is the union, the combination of these two motives—interest and jealousy!"

"Well?" I said, in spite of myself, carried away by this reasoning.

"Well, we shall find it exactly by substituting, in the place of Otto, Franz, the fish-dealer, as you have been the first to do! Franz, jealous of his brother, and envious of his little fortune."

"What are you saying?" cried Monsieur Marathon, in amazement.

"I say," stated Monsieur Théodule, "that, in comparing the story of Otto, your gratuitous hypothesis, Judge, and the hypothesis of Monsieur Aubry—this last version is, mathematically, the addition of the first two. I say that not only does the hypothesis of Monsieur Aubry

adapt itself closely to the story of Otto, but that the story of Otto even illumines it with a clear light and renders it more probable than ever! All these things, I repeat, fit like the pieces on a checker board, and if Franz, under the mask of Otto, as we presume, gives us the play which we can most easily accept, it is because, as Monsieur Aubry, who is always perspicacious, has declared, he holds 'all the clues of the investigation in his own hand.' No one can contradict him, Monsieur Aubry least of all of us! The play is reduced to its simplest accessories. There is only one personage. It is a monologue!

"Is the surviving van Brymans Franz or Otto? Either of the two conjectures has its obscurities, which, however, are only on the surface. We cannot require from Otto—if it is Otto—a description of the accomplices whom he was unable to see and, as it is nearly impossible for us to discover these sailors of a phantom ship, we find ourselves thus in the presence of a negative fact, with which it would be ridiculous to charge Otto!

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“On the other hand, we have scarcely to expect from Franz—if it is Franz—a contradiction, since it is never he who speaks, never he who exposes himself,—he does not appear at all in the drama invented! There remain the vague suppositions to be drawn from the information received from Antwerp—the alarming emotion of Otto van Brymans’ wife—and the hesitations of Monsieur Aubry! Monsieur Aubry! Monsieur Aubry will tell us himself, I feel convinced, that his hesitations are those of Pauline Steurs, that they know neither more nor less than we do, with the information received from Antwerp, and that all these things, after all, are merely suppositions! And Monsieur Aubry will be right, and we should be wrong to trust entirely to these presumptions. That is why it would be utterly useless to force confessions from Otto van Brymans’ wife, as the judge recommends.

“I am going still farther, and I say that, if this woman came to-day to inform us that she does not recognise her husband in the surviving van Brymans, we ought not to believe her

word, but allow her testimony only the value of a clue, no more conclusive than the one which made her recognise the corpse in the Morgue!

“The whole problem does not lie in the demonstration of the guilt of Franz, but in the identification of Franz! And, as soon as we leave that point, we shall only wander away from the question!”

I bowed in sign of assent, and ventured to say:

“That is my opinion. It is even the only reason which makes me believe in the truthfulness of Otto’s story, because the identification of which you speak is impossible! Question the only two persons who are able to give you an opinion worthy of being considered—Pauline Steurs, the wife of Otto, and Pauline Mutel, the sweetheart of Franz—and you will see!”

“I shall question neither Pauline Mutel, nor Pauline Steurs,” replied the gentleman with light eyes, in the same demonstrative voice. “I shall question the man who is—either the lover of one or the husband of the other!”

At these words I rose from my chair, exclaiming:

"Take care, Mr. Journalist, or Mr. Archæologist, I don't know exactly, but you are going to play a dangerous game! The prosecuting attorney has cautioned you about it. The question is a delicate one! I know Franz, and I know Otto! Since you know how to reason, let us reason.

"You believe that you hold one of the clues of the affair in your skilful hands—and you have just recognised that Franz 'holds them all.' This, it seems to me, by anticipation, admits your inferiority! And I am afraid that your method may lead you to the very opposite of your design. For, with regard to the clues of the affair, if you are speaking to Otto, he will have none of them, and consequently will be weaker than you—that is, at your mercy, at the mercy of an investigation directed toward a fixed end—I defy you to contradict me—that is sullied in advance by partiality! You cannot start from that point: the guilty man, better armed than you, will escape you, and the inno-

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cent one, with empty hands, will succumb to your blows! And this is precisely the way that, in many criminal affairs, people go straight, without any check, into judicial error!"

"My lad," remarked Monsieur Marathon contemptuously, "we are not sufficiently deaf not to hear the voice of innocence!"

"Do you think so!" I replied, in the same tone. "Innocence has aphony, my dear sir, and it is human folly to try to make it speak! But I wish, with all my heart, that you would not commit this senseless deed, which would be, I have a sorrowful dread, a new crime in your account with the survivor."

The three men chuckled. Monsieur Marathon turned the pages of his Conan Doyle, and, puffing at his pipe, repeated:

"This book here is more useful than the code!"

The prosecuting attorney was rolling cigarettes; the gentleman with the light eyes had the air of being sure of himself and his course of action! As to my lawyer, he was looking at

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me with bewildered eyes, and I read in his gaze:

“Well! Didn’t I tell you that something monstrous was going to happen?”

“Gentlemen,” I said, in taking leave, “I have promised Otto van Brymans to go to see him to-day, at the inn of *The Thieving Magpie*—I am in haste to find this family happy again, Pauline Steurs, who is an excellent woman, and little Fritz, a charming boy, and I have the honour to wish you good-morning!”

“Don’t tell them about our tactics, above all!” said Monsieur Marathon anxiously.

I smiled pityingly and, opening the door, said:

“Have no fear! It is not I who, in so delicate a matter, will lack delicacy!”

XXII

THE WOMAN, THE CHILD, AND THE DOG

To reach Biville-sur-Mer, I turned away from the long road, straight as an I, bordered with trees stunted by the wind from the sea, which we had followed to reach Dieppe in a carriage, and went along the coast through the little villages scattered near the cliffs—Puys, Bracquemont, Belleville, Berneval. They were charming, restful nooks, buried in verdure, to which led zigzag roads, unlike in character, which constantly contracted the horizon.

I could not describe how greatly this walk in the country benefited me. I drew from it a store of moral strength, a moral strength which I needed, in order not to be affected by the vague fear of Pauline Mutel, the gossip of my landlady, and the eager controversy of the legal gentlemen whose whims I dreaded.

I reached Biville almost at nightfall. At the

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entrance of the village, François, the blacksmith, saw me above the thorn hedge which bordered the yard of the forge, and cried:

" Ah! it is you, Monsieur Aubry. . . . They are expecting you! "

He had come down the stairs, hollowed in the earth, and walked forward to meet me.

He seemed to regard me as a shipwrecked person, concerning whom all hope had been given up, and said:

" You may be sure, Monsieur Aubry, that nobody here would believe you guilty. It has been a drama, hasn't it? "

And, with his big, horny hand, he pointed to the village and the tavern of *The Thieving Magpie*. Then, with downcast eyes, he added:

" *He* is expecting you! But you will find a change there."

I answered with a meaningless compliment, to thank him for his good opinion. But he must have expected something more on my part, for he took a step forward with me. He had slipped his hands under his leather apron,

and his sabots clapped along the road by my side. He went on:

"I should like to know your feeling!"

"My feeling?"

"Yes, I am going to take a cup of coffee, after the soup, to see what you think of it!"

"What I think of what?"

"You know very well what I mean! Here there are plenty of pros and cons! It is terribly hard to make up one's mind!"

I was again irritated against François, as I had been against Pauline Mutel, against Mère Hurteaux, against the prosecuting attorney and the gentleman with the light eyes. And I cut him short by saying, in a dry tone:

"So it is! I'll see you this evening, Père François!"

And I left him standing there, in the very middle of the road.

When I had arrived in front of the tavern, I saw through the window-panes, whose jaconet curtains had not yet been drawn, Otto van Brymans' wife, standing on a stool in the act

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of lighting the big kerosene lamp suspended from the beams of the ceiling in the kitchen.

I went in. She turned on her pedestal.

"Oh! it is you, Monsieur Aubry," she added, in a timid voice. "We had given you up."

I excused myself as best I could, and tried to look as smiling as possible.

"Well," I said. "You are happy, in your misfortune, to have found this luckless Otto safe and sound, my poor woman!"

She had come down from the stool. Her eyes blinked on account of the sudden light. She threw the match into the fire.

"Sit down, Monsieur Aubry. You are at home!"

Still she did not answer my congratulation. Her dilated eyes gave her face an expression of bewilderment, and stared fixedly into mine. Her gaze rested on me heavily, persistently. But her compressed lips did not open. It seemed as if she were constantly swallowing her saliva. A silent horror was depicted on her features. At last her mouth parted to say:

"*He* is there, in the orchard. *He* will come in presently!"

And, sitting down near me, she raised the corner of her apron, completely covering her face, and began to weep silently.

"Come!" I said compassionately. "You are not sensible!"

It was precisely the same pitying remark which I had made to Pauline Mutel.

Pauline Steurs let the corner of her apron fall.

"How can I be! It is no use for me to try as hard as I can! It is stronger than I!"

And again she wiped her eyes, heavy with tears.

Just at this moment we were surprised by Otto, who had come in through the little glass door in the back kitchen, opening upon the vegetable garden. In vain his wife drew herself up and tried to change her expression—he had witnessed the brief little scene. His stern eyebrows contracted. But his slow, kind voice instantly contradicted the change of feature.

"Ah! this is good, Monsieur Aubry. . . . I was beginning to give up expecting you!"

I had not the courage to address him with a variation of the remark which Pauline Steurs had not answered.

"Well, Otto, you are happy, in your misfortune, to have found your wife again."

He was pacing the kitchen from right to left, swinging his arms.

"The table ought to be laid. Monsieur Aubry must be hungry!"

The landlady had turned her back to him. With her face and half her body in the cupboard, she was counting the plates and dishes, to avoid a direct answer.

Otto had unwrapped his right hand. He showed it to me under the lamp, and explained in the calmest possible manner:

"The doctor came this morning. He was afraid of gangrene!"

Then, without any change of voice:

"Do you think that the court will give us permission to bury my unfortunate brother tomorrow?"

I made an evasive gesture of uncertainty.

"Ah!" he said, in a weary tone. "How I wish it were all over!"

Little Fritz, who, from the story above, had heard his mother setting the table, came running downstairs. Rushing up to me, he sprang into my lap and threw his little arms around my neck, pressing closely to me, with unusual vehemence.

"Ah!" said Otto, "you know your kind Monsieur Aubry."

The child had turned his head away. His dilated eyes had the same bewildered expression as his mother's and, as if seized with a similar fear, his little face bore the impress of the same terror. He buried it in the hollow of my shoulder, and hugged me more closely still.

Otto had some difficulty in repressing an outbreak of anger. He turned on his heel, shrugged his shoulders, and found this subterfuge:

"I am going to water the horses!"

Pauline Steurs had swiftly approached me.

"One cannot say that Fritz, a child,—has

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reasons like a grown-up person—like you—and yet——!”

I had neither the courage, nor the presence of mind to find a satisfactory answer.

We sat down to the table. The landlady had fried a rabbit—and the whole interest of the conversation turned upon the quality of this dish, of which Otto was extremely fond.

I had again found my friend of the good old days, Dick, the spaniel, who was asking me questions with his paw on my left knee. At least these were queries I could answer. And I dipped into the sauce pieces of bread, which he snapped up, wagging his tail to thank me.

Otto took two bones from the side of his plate and held them out to Dick.

But Dick turned his curly head away, his ears hanging low, without any movement of his merry tail.

“Dick!” ordered Otto, in a stern tone.

But Dick, instead of obeying the command, as usual, crawled to the threshold and lay down across the doorway, with his nose down.

Then, no longer hiding his anger, Otto rose from the table in a rage:

"Begone, you wretched brute!"

And, opening the door, he gave a violent kick to the animal, which ran out of doors into the darkness.

Pauline Steurs looked at me intently. And, unable to endure her gaze, it was I who lowered my eyes.

The blacksmith came as we were beginning dessert; then, after the blacksmith, the carpenter; then the village farmers. I had never seen, except on Sunday afternoon, so many people gathered at *The Thieving Magpie*.

Otto was made to repeat the story of his sufferings—for the tenth time since the evening before. He consented. He was obliged to consent; customers have requirements which are not always dictated by very humane feelings!

"Let us go into the large room," said Pauline Steurs.

The conversation became general, confused, and loud in tone. The farmers pitied Franz's fate. The haberdasher insisted:

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"But, Otto, tell us why your little finger was cut off!"

François, the blacksmith, was watching me slily.

I said to the landlady:

"Give me my bedroom candlestick. . . . I need rest."

This was not a pretext. I *did* need rest! Physically and morally, I was used up.

I no longer had to struggle solely against the fears of Pauline Mutel and of Mère Hurteaux—against the tricks of the court.—I had to defend myself against the more and more distracted terror of Otto's wife, his child, and his dog.

XXIII

IS IT FRANZ WHO IS WEEPING? IS IT OTTO WHO IS
TALKING?

ABOUT ten o'clock I heard the noise of the loud-talking customers. Peasants sitting around a game of dominoes have high voices and sonorous laughs. My room was situated just above, and though the words did not reach me distinctly, the uproar was so great that I could not close my eyes.

When the clock struck nine, shortly after I had gone to my chamber, I heard Pauline Steurs on the way to hers. I had recognised the step of her little Fritz. She was leaving the closing of the house to Otto, as usual, and this took place, as was customary, after ten.

Through the window which I had left open, I heard the groups separating in front of *The Thieving Magpie*, the blacksmith's voice bid-

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ding the carpenter good-night. Then I heard Otto putting up the shutters.

Everything relapsed into silence. And in this silence Otto's heavy footsteps sounded heavier still upon the tiles of the deserted kitchen. His tread made the staircase creak. The light of his candle cast a ray above my door. I thought that he stopped in front of it.

He really had stopped there. I heard his voice, which he was trying to subdue as he said hesitatingly:

"Are you asleep, Monsieur Aubry?"

This produced a strange effect upon me. I buried myself under the bed-clothes, without answering. Probably he did not expect a reply, and his question, doubtless, was merely a form, for he instantly turned the latch and cautiously entered the room.

"Excuse me, Monsieur Aubry."

He had set his candle on the night-table, drawn a chair near my bed, and quietly taken his seat in it. The illumination of his face by the light of the candle end gave it a fantastic aspect. He seemed overwhelmed, desperate.

Letting his head fall into his hands, he sighed:

"Depend upon it, Monsieur Aubry—there will be trouble."

I had propped myself on my elbow among the pillows, anxiously. I was watching this man curiously. I was trying to separate his voice from the precisely similar voice of his murdered brother. And, like everybody else, I felt the emotion aroused by this living enigma. Was it Otto who was speaking?

He went on slowly in a heartrending voice:

"This is it!" he said—"I can't bear it any longer! You have seen, Monsieur Aubry. You have heard them! They do not believe that it is I! It is horrible!"

He wiped his forehead with the back of his mutilated hand, then raised his head as if to show some imaginary defiance.

"If it were only they! François, the blacksmith—Franz's old friends—but she—Pauline, my dear wife—You have seen it! Even my little Fritz, who follows his mother's example! Ah! think of it! During the twenty-four hours

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since I have returned to the light of day, I have suffered more than I did the whole endless night of the drama! It's enough to drive a man mad! What would you have me say to them? I don't understand anything, myself! I can go no farther than they! Why are they blaming me?"

This question allowed me to make the following reply:

"I don't see that there is anything for which you can be blamed!"

"Oh! on your part," said he, "I thank you for your confidence—you are the only one. So, tell me what can make them suppose . . ."

"No."

"Yes! I beseech you. Let me know, at least, where I stand!"

And he snuffed the candle with his big spatula-shaped fingers. The cool air from outside blew in through the large open window. Big black clouds were sweeping across the sky toward the west, coming from the land as if attracted by the neighbouring sea at the hour of the low tide.

"Do you want me to shut the window?"

"No—Otto!"

"I am listening to you, Monsieur Aubry!"

"This is it," I said. "There are some people who believe that you are Franz and that you have killed your brother Otto, in order to take his place!"

"People say that? Really?" he cried out, with a bewilderment which made the muscles of his face tremble visibly.

"They say," I went on, "that it would have been very easy for you, after leaving us, to take the sailor Shoepen back on board his ship, to have carried him to the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf and strangled him there—that it would also have been easy for you, after having struck me down in the stable on the Quay Henri IV, to have stabbed Otto with the knife you wrested from Shoepen in the course of the fight with the Danish sailors. They say that, having accomplished your double crime, under the circumstances purposely planned to create the confusion that you desired, you carried the body of Otto in front of Pauline Mutel's shop, and after having placed your empty belt around his waist, in order to

give the motive of robbery an appearance of certainty, and having cut off his little finger to prevent his identification, you had the horrible courage to subject yourself to the same amputation.

"After this, certain of impunity, it was quite possible for you to introduce yourself into Simon's gobe through the opening halfway up the cliff which you knew—and there await the progress of events."

"What events?" he asked with a bewildered manner.

"That is, to be able to give, before the court, in your story, which was *exactly* the opposite of the one I have just briefly told you, the appearance of undeniable truth."

Otto was seized with convulsive trembling. I saw his heavy eyelids swell. Large tears rolled down his red cheeks, which fairly quivered with rage.

To look at this man, so agitated, with staring eyes, I asked myself, as every one would have done in my place:

"Is it Franz who is weeping?"

But I had no time to analyse my feelings at that minute. He rose, uttered a sound like a wounded animal, his throat choked by an inexpressible horror, and said simply:

"And it is Franz, my unfortunate brother, murdered by a ruffian—it is Franz whom they dare to accuse of so horrible a crime!"

To listen to this protest, in place of the denial which I had expected, I felt completely upset and asked myself:

"Is it Otto who is speaking?"

The clouds had scattered in the sky, which was streaked with clear openings. I saw his face flooded with tears. And, in my increasing anxiety, I repeated:

"Is it Franz who is weeping?"

If the man who was weeping before me was Franz, that is, so marvellous a dissembler, Justice, in the absence of material proof, would never get the better of him, and it would be useless for Monsieur Théodule to play Sherlock Holmes, he would always lack the little finger with the silver ring to baffle a criminal so absolutely master of himself.

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But if the man who was speaking to me with such agitating despair was really Otto van Brymans, I felt that he was irremediably in the hands of a blind justice, and I saw only too clearly the results, far more agonising and terrible than all which had previously happened—to which the hypothesis which I had been the first to face might lead . . . the hypothesis now haunting every one: the judge, the prosecuting attorney, Pauline Mutel, my wife; the landlady, François, the blacksmith—Pauline Steurs, every man and woman, and against which I was struggling as vainly as this man!

The man had risen. He was pacing up and down the room, like a wild beast in a cage. Pressing his clenched fists upon his temples, he sobbed:

“But how can I prove to them that I . . . am myself?”

His shadow, thrown upon the wall by the light of the smoky candle, was struggling, writhing, like a figure in a cinematograph. He was wailing:

“And you think this is life! I have scarcely

come out of one nightmare before I go into another. You believe that a brain less strong than mine would not have been able to resist what has happened. But could I expect to find in my home my own wife so changed in regard to me—and even my little boy. My wife and my little boy who avoid me—whom I fill with horror! It's enough to drive a man mad! You may well suppose that I have only one desire: to get away from here—to go back to Antwerp, to my native country, as soon as possible. I said so this morning to Pauline. She looked at me with astonishment—and did not even answer! If this is to last, I would rather go and break my head upon the pebbles of the beach, from the top of the cliffs!”

I stopped him by saying in a stifled voice:

“Don't do that, Otto! It would be giving still more probability to the supposition of those who assert that you are Franz! They would not fail to say: ‘It is remorse for his crime . . .’”

He interrupted me, with a dazed expression:

“Remorse! What remorse?”

“The police . . .” I was going on.

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Then this man burst into a laugh which made his face terrible:

"The police! What police? I have nothing to do with the police, I suppose! . . . If you imagine that that disturbs me! . . . No more than the questions of the blacksmith . . . and others. It is solely on account of my wife and my little Fritz!"

And he repeated:

"My wife! . . . my little boy!"

And, in repeating these two words, I will swear that he looked like a person under the influence of some hallucination.

He had moved forward to the window-sill. The livid sky made a screen behind him. His shadow, enlarged out of all proportion, gave me a sense of fear. He seemed to be reflecting. Making an aimless movement, he said in a hoarse voice:

"The robbers would have done better to kill me on the spot!"

Then, as if under the spur of some irresistible impulse:

"It would be just as well to end it at once."

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And he threw his leg over the sill.

With a bound I was out of bed, crying:

"Otto! . . . Otto! . . . don't do that!"

I had upset the candle on the night-table and was plunged in darkness.

Through the open window, the man had leaped from the second story down into the road and vanished in the gloom.

XXIV

IN WHICH THE GENTLEMAN WITH THE LIGHT EYES
COMES TOO LATE TO EXERCISE HIS
REAL PROFESSION

OTTO VAN BRYMANS' wife was now filling the house with her cries. She who had shut herself, until then, in a stern silence was now succeeding her dumb terror by a noisy expression of fright.

"You will alarm your little Fritz!" I said to her.

I had hurriedly thrown on my clothes. She had lighted two lanterns. Her hands were trembling, her voice faltered . . .

"Which way did he go, Monsieur Aubry?"

"I could not tell in the darkness."

"Hush! Listen!" she said, holding her breath, "some one is knocking at the door of the restaurant."

I listened. The blows on the oak door were redoubled. We had the same thought, the same

passing relief, the same hope. If it were *He!* Perhaps he had reconsidered the matter, after his impulse of madness!

And, without asking who was knocking at this late hour, she rushed to the door and opened it.

It was not Otto!

"What is it you want?" she demanded in a surly tone.

The stranger replied:

"Look here! I've met with an accident to my motor-cycle. It is impossible to go farther. Have you a room?"

Pauline Steurs was going to bang the door in the intruder's face. I stopped her movement. I had recognised the voice of Monsieur Théodule.

I raised the lantern I was holding in my hands above my head, so as to throw the light full upon his face.

"Come in!" I said. . . . "You have arrived at the right time."

The landlady of the tavern had no leisure to show her astonishment at seeing me speak to the

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traveller as an acquaintance. . . . The latter had pushed his machine into the hall and, taking off his leather gloves, held out his hand to me.

"You look very much upset."

"There is good reason for it!" I replied.

I had not the trouble of continuing.

François, the blacksmith, who, from over the way, had noticed this going and coming, appeared to ask out of curiosity what was happening. His wife had accompanied him. Pauline Steurs burst into sobs, wailing to her:

"You will take care of the boy, Ludivine! Ah! this would surely be the last of the misfortunes!"

I had drawn Monsieur Théodule aside into a corner of the kitchen.

"If Otto van Brymans has carried out his plan," I said, "you will have a very good chance of finding him dead!"

Monsieur Théodule fairly jumped.

"What are you saying?"

"Let your machine stay here. It would only

be in your way in following the very bad road which leads to the cliffs. Accompany us on foot, if you feel inclined to do so."

The man confronting me was no longer either the correspondent of *I Know Everything* nor the pseudo-archæologist, but an Inspector of Police, openly, who perceives his prey escaping him at the exact moment when he believes he is about to lay his hand upon it!

In two or three curt sentences he made me recall to mind the circumstances which had preceded Otto's departure.

He behaved as if he were demented.

"Follow me! Let us make haste! Perhaps we shall be able to get there before he takes the law into his own hands!"

"Well!" I said, "so there is still the same misunderstanding? . . . It is Franz after whom you will run, while we are all going to the help of Otto!"

"Is this gentleman coming with us?" asked Pauline Steurs, through her tears.

"Yes . . . this gentleman is coming with us!"

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The blacksmith anxiously approached me, in his turn.

"You had not foreseen this!" he said . . .
"neither you, nor anybody else . . . and yet, on thinking . . . this could not fail to happen . . . whether it was one, or whether it was the other!"

Monsieur Théodule, like a man of forethought, asked:

"Where does the mayor of Biville live?"

It was François, the blacksmith, who answered:

"The mayor is Mattard—the farmer—but he has been at Offranville, hunting, since the day before yesterday! However, I am the deputy of the parish, and if his place must be filled, I shall be here!"

And I noticed the care which Providence had taken to use, in the search for Otto, the policeman charged with arresting Franz, the magistrate of Biville appointed to establish the suicide which I feared, Pauline Steurs, his wife . . . and I, his last friend.

We set out in the darkness. François guided

us, holding the lantern in his hand. Otto van Brymans' wife clung to my arm. Monsieur Théodule, very impatient, walked beside us, thoroughly irritated by this mischance! And I saw that Dick, the spaniel, had followed us in the fields.

Through the darkness the blacksmith's voice alternated with Pauline Steurs'. Every two minutes they uttered in turn the same plaintive call:

"Otto! . . . Otto!"

And echo alone answered them:

"Otto! . . . Otto!"

Monsieur Théodule had the audacity to shout in imitation:

"Franz!"

And echo alone, still in imitation, answered him:

"Franz!"

The wind from the open sea had begun to sweep large, threatening clouds across the lowering sky. Before reaching the cliffs, I thought that we had lost Dick, or that he had returned to the house. I whistled to him; and at the end

of five minutes the dog again joined us, at full speed.

It was to me that his demonstrations were addressed. He leaped up to my shoulders, seemed to want to hold me by my coat, to drag me, to make me turn back, to try to lead me. . . .

We could guide ourselves sufficiently well, by the help of the lanterns, to climb down the winding staircase, cut in the living rock, which led to the beach. Only Monsieur Théodule, not knowing the difficulties of the descent, walked cautiously—and only Dick would not descend at all. It was useless for me to call, to coax, nothing would avail.

We explored the shingle, in vain.

François and Pauline Steurs had resumed their alternate call:

“Otto! . . . Otto!”

Their poor, weak cry of distress was lost in the tremendous uproar of the waves and the furious wind.

The blacksmith, who soon wearied of a search without result, said:

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"We might as well look for a needle in a haymow!"

Monsieur Théodule himself admitted that it would be better to wait until daybreak.

So we went back to the staircase in the cliffs. We must have formed a strange procession with our lanterns, in the darkness, in the presence of the bellowing sea.

I was surprised to find Dick, who welcomed me with still more eager demonstrations than when I went away.

But I was thoroughly perplexed when, on the way home, Dick deliberately refused to let go of the tail of my coat, which he had taken in his mouth.

He dragged me to the right—in spite of my resistance—to a path that led between two hedges.

"Where are you going? You are taking the wrong way, Monsieur Aubry!" the blacksmith warned me.

"No!" I said, "follow me!"

Pauline Steurs, without knowing why, repeated:

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"Let us follow Monsieur Aubry!"

And Monsieur Théodule assented:

"Yes . . . yes . . . let us follow the dog!"

At the end of forty paces, Dick released me. He was running before us with his nose close to the ground, as if on the track of game.

We soon lost sight of him. But we speedily heard him. We heard, in the tragic darkness, in the haunting silence, a prolonged howl, his death howl—the howl the good spaniel had uttered on the threshold of the inn of *The Thieving Magpie* the morning he saw me set out in the company of his master, Otto, and Franz, the fish-dealer!

We all had the same presentiment. We quickened our pace, and crossed, this time guided solely by the barking of the dog, an orchard of thick-set apple trees which made the darkness more dense.—We stumbled in the grass at every step, striking against some tree-trunk.

At last Monsieur Théodule, who now preceded us, uttered a cry——

Monsieur Théodule, the first of the party, had

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just discovered, hanging from the main bough of a cherry tree, by the aid of Franz's famous belt—the body of Otto van Brymans swaying in the wild wind, amid the darkness.

We were to form, at this moment, a group whose tragedy was unlike that of the one which confronted the sea!

Pauline Steurs, mad with terror, had thrown herself into my arms! I felt her shuddering upon my breast, distracted, on the verge of fainting. . . . and I believe that I pressed her tenderly to my heart, and that I kissed her, as I would a sister in sorrow.

Monsieur Théodule had swiftly unbuckled the leather belt.

With the help of François, he had laid the body on the grass, and kneeling near the inert form, he slowly moved the light of the lantern over the face, whose eyes were already fixed and glassy—the countenance which was so exactly the visage of Franz upon the slab in the Morgue!

Monsieur Théodule knew the first remedies to be applied in such a case. . . . But all these efforts were useless.

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He soon recognised it, with a gesture of despair, to which was added a remark which would not have been expected under such circumstances :

“ This is decidedly bad luck.”

François, the blacksmith, uttered a heavy sigh.

“ My poor friend ! His brain was not strong enough to bear the loss of Franz, his unfortunate brother ! ”

But I heeded neither the policeman's words, nor the blacksmith's remark.

My attention was otherwise attracted. My attention and, I may say, distracted as the poor woman might be, the attention of Pauline Steurs were arrested by the attitude—the attitude, there is no other word—of Dick, the spaniel, whose instinct—surely a disconcerting fact—was neither superior, nor inferior to our intelligence.

Dick was now licking the hand of the corpse.

Dick, with genuine howls of grief, was mourning his master.

Dick, in a word, with his instinct seemed to recognise Otto, dead, when he had hesitated,

like human beings with their intelligence, to recognise him, living.

And this sudden change in the instinct of an animal caused me more suffering than all the rest—more than the alteration of François's opinion—more than the last farewell cry of Pauline Steurs, before at this spectacle she fainted in my arms—a cry of irresistible pity, a cry of absolution, perhaps—a human cry, unquestionably.

“Otto! . . . my poor Otto!”

XXV

EPILOGUE

It is very probable that I shall never again see the little village of Biville-sur-Mer, on the side of the Eu road, three kilometers from the beach, where, in the humble cemetery which surrounds the church now rest, side by side, Otto and Franz van Brymans.

A single gravestone, a wooden cross, is erected to their memory. Having always lived together, they lie in the same tomb, so alike, even more alike than during their lives, with their right hands each now lacking the little finger!

There is no farther error possible, no more barren discussions. The same epitaph covers them with its eternal ambiguity:

Here Rest the Van Brymans Brothers

It is very probable that I shall never again see Pauline Steurs, who has returned to her native

region, at Borgerhout, with her little Fritz, after having sold the landed property which she had inherited from her uncle Leopold, as well as the tavern of *The Thieving Magpie*, to François, the blacksmith, who, though already too old to strike the anvil, has all the qualifications required to make an excellent innkeeper, the love of appetisers and the passion for dominoes.

It is probable that I shall never return to Dieppe, where Pauline Mutel kept a little shop to earn her living in the Place Moulin-à-Vent. She has retained too frightful a remembrance of this city. And since she has once more become my lawful wife, I am the happiest of men. I had this year, at the National, a great success of curiosity with her portrait.

I ask myself, as I did formerly, if the hidden purpose, the secret design of this tragedy was not solely our reunion, after a three-years' divorce?

Yes, I am well aware of the disproportion there would be between the cause and the effect,

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as I formerly said to Monsieur Marathon, concerning the tragedy itself.

In the end, our reunion must be the only result—I could willingly say the only appreciable result.

And Pauline does appreciate it with a grateful fervour which perhaps I do not entirely deserve. We have forgiven each other the mutual wrongs that a stupid court of justice had conferred upon us in relation to one another! I was impelled to act in this manner, not through pity, but by what I believed to be my strict duty.

And I even think that, aside from my duty, an irresistible sympathy led me to it.

I cannot remember even now, without great pleasure, the surpassing joy which I brought to the poor woman, who, after all, had been, she above all, only a victim of Franz, when after the burial of the van Brymans brothers and the closing of the investigation which ended in no ground for prosecution, I went to see her in the Place Moulin-à-Vent, and told her what I had not had the courage to say on the day of my release.

"Let us fly together! Let us forget this city where you have been so unhappy."

I can still see the scene just as it occurred. I see Pauline Mutel burst into tears and kneel beseeching my forgiveness for a past which I had no occasion to pardon, and blessing me as her deliverer.

I can still see our preparations for departure from the Rue Tête-de-Bœuf—our haste to leave this city, to which a letter from the artist Albert Lebourg had brought me as an artist, a dilettante.

I see once more Maître Croulebarbe, my devoted counsel, coming to bid me farewell with a very dejected manner, and saying to me:

"You do well to go away from here, Monsieur Aubry. You have everybody against you . . . those who take sides with Franz, as well as those who uphold Otto! However the matter may be classed, Judge Marathon and the prosecuting attorney are always contending over it . . . from pure love of arguing. But where they do agree, to be sure, is to admit that,

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morally, you are the principal person who is responsible in the affair."

• "I?" I exclaimed, startled.

"Yes, you! It is you who have given those who maintain that Franz hung himself, driven to the deed through remorse for his abominable crime, the first reasons for this hypothesis.

"It is again you, by your last attitude, who furnish the others, those who believe that Otto could not survive the grief of having lost his brother, the appearance of being in the right!

"Monsieur Théodule, himself, tells whoever cares to listen that you have impeded the course of justice and rendered impossible, at the last minute, a search which bid fair to be crowned with success within forty-eight hours! Monsieur Marathon has flung his Conan Doyle into the fire and sent to the deuce the Sherlock Holmeses, from under whose feet you and the last of the van Brymans brothers have fairly cut the ground away.

"You have a personal enemy in the prosecuting attorney, and you are doing well to leave the city, as well as Madame Pauline Mutel, who

could not continue her business a week longer without being an object of public prosecution. A crime has been committed”

I remember that just at this point I interrupted my lawyer, who had never been so much imposed upon, and said to him:

“A crime has been committed—evidently, my dear Maître, you can say nothing better, and you can say nothing more! But it is no fault of mine if people were unwilling, either to understand me at first or to comprehend me afterward.—They would not listen to me when I declared: ‘I deny you all authority to conduct an investigation of which only the *surviving* van Brymans brother holds all the clues in his hand!’ And they would not comprehend me afterward, when I added: ‘Innocence has aphony, and it is human folly to try to make it speak!’ And it is now—really it is high time—that people grant what I have said a forced attention! If the prosecuting attorney, the judge, the excitable population of the city—divided into two camps, those who side with Otto and those who side with Franz—if each of these had a little

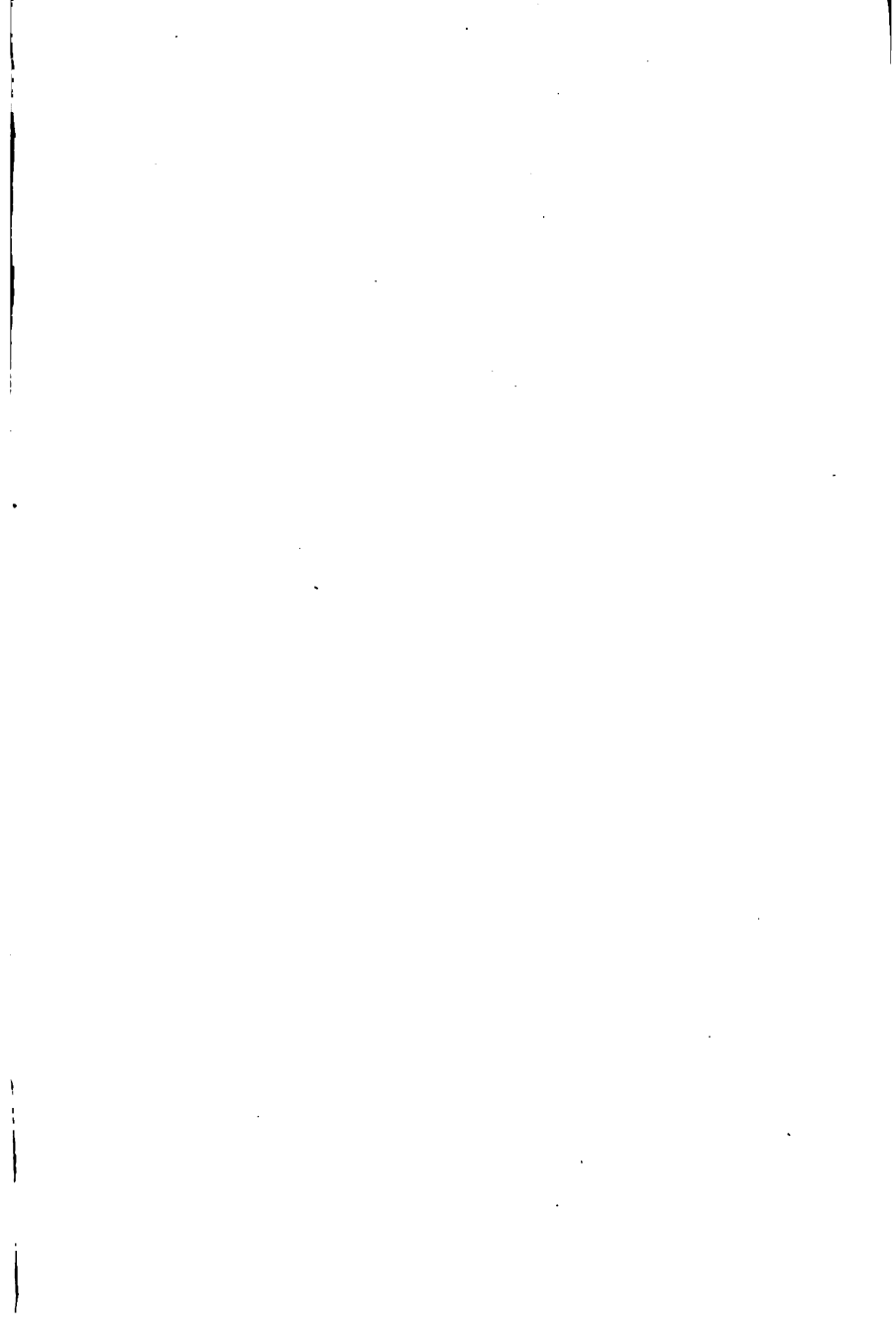
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philosophy—a little of yours and a little of mine—each would accept your formula, which is the good, the only true one.

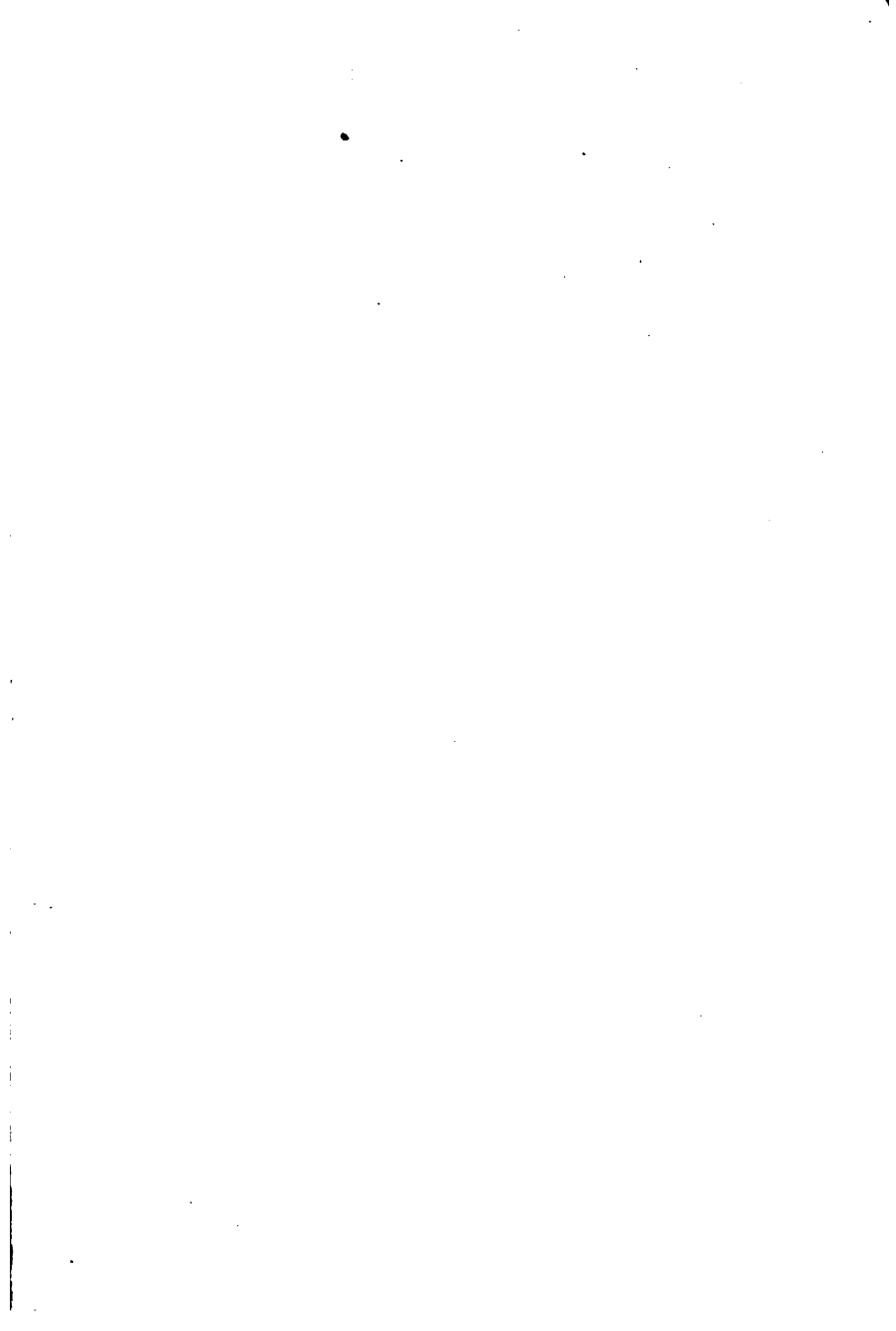
“A crime has been committed . . . and the most extraordinary thing is, not that the name of the assassin will never be revealed, but that the victims also will remain concealed, whatever may be the pretension of knowing either the one or the other!”

And is not this the only conclusion to give to the tragical adventure in which I was involved, led by fate or by chance, as the reader will believe—according to his choice?

THE END







**This book is under no circumstances to be
taken from the Building**

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